

## Harry Potter and the Nightmares of Futures Past - Chapter 1

Harry Potter, thirty years old and the last surviving member of the Order of the Phoenix, blinked his eyes rapidly, trying to restore his vision. His ears still rang from the explosion and being half-blinded left him close to helpless. He dashed the tears from his eyes, ignoring the debris that rained down around him. *I have to see this*, he thought, *I've spent so long... I have to do this*. He squinted, holding up a shaking hand to shield his face.

Gobbets of flesh, drops of blood, bits of gravel rained down, but the deluge eventually trailed off. Before him was a smoking crater, almost twenty feet across. Harry's breath hitched painfully in his lungs. *Was it finally over?* He blinked rapidly again when he saw a twisted mass of half-melted steel imbedded in the lip of the crater. The sword of Gryffindor was no more, having finished its purpose in finally ending the line of Salazar Slytherin. Harry mourned the vague awareness he could sense in the blade.

*Whatever bit of Godric he left of himself in the sword is probably happier now. Harry mused; it's served its purpose, so it can move on to the next great adventure, as Albus used to say.*

"I suppose it's my turn now," Harry said aloud. With one last glance at his final battlefield, he Disapparated.

Harry appeared in the ruined Great Hall. The steady drip of water from the shattered ceiling beat a quiet tattoo on the cracked flagstones. It seemed to rain constantly these days and Harry wondered if it was a consequence of the battle that had been fought here. If the heavens wanted to weep over what had happened here so many years ago, who was he to disagree?

Still the patter of droplets on stone was soothing in its own way. Any balm for his grief was welcome indeed. The rage was gone, burned out in the apocalyptic fury that ended the war, and now Harry was left feeling hollow and cold... like a burned out building after the flames had died. Like Twelve Grimmauld Place.

The gaunt man in his tattered and blood-stained robes sank to his knees on the wet stone floor. Memories of happier times in this place overwhelmed him and he wept bitterly until darkness claimed him.

Harry awoke cold, wet, and shivering. He slowly rose to his feet, trying to massage feeling back into his fingers. *That was stupid*, he thought as old scars and badly-mended fractures began to all throb in time with his pulse, *I'm not in my bloody twenties anymore. I'm going to be sore all day, if someone ambushes-*

He cut that thought off. The war was over. He'd finally killed that bastard. If he'd had any Death Eaters left, Tom would have had them with him at the end, hoping for some advantage. Even if some had fled the conflict, Harry remembered what Hermione told him about her examinations of the Dark Mark, a corruption of the ancient Protean Charm. With the final death of the bearer of the Master Mark, everyone else that carried the mark would perish as well. Harry imagined that little surprise was kept from the Death Eaters though.

Harry took in a deep breath and let it out. It was over, and he could finally relax. He looked up, past the shattered stone vaults, at the storm clouds brewing overhead. The war was over, but the price had been far, far too high. He felt his hands curl into fists, the ragged nails digging into his palms. *Too many...*

The rubble around him began to shift, smaller pieces tumbling down, the haphazard piles of stone left from the cleanup settling. The ministry had barely been organized enough to send Aurors out to retrieve the bodies; they never had a chance to even discuss rebuilding before they were gone as well.

Harry swallowed, ruthlessly forcing his magic back down. A small corner of his mind wanted to set it loose let it rage out of control, even if it brought the remaining walls down on his head. *I need to let Albus know*, he thought to himself, desperate for any distraction at this point.

He still remembered the way to the headmaster's office, and barely noticed when he had to detour around collapsed stonework or jump over a crack in the floor. When he reached the half-melted gargoyle, he laid his hand on its distorted face and whispered, "The end of days". The charm he had replaced on the statue caused it to swing

aside with a grumble of stone on stone. Harry slowly ascended the stairs.

The headmaster's office still looked like a disaster area. The stone walls were black with scorch marks and the furnishings were little more than ashes. Harry remembered Hermione wincing when she first saw that the priceless tomes had been reduced to ashes. Of course they had all been numb by that point, but that reaction was the kind of thing Ron and he had kidded her about since they were first years. That memory brought it all back to him again, and bile flooded the back of his throat as other thoughts rose unbidden.

"Harry?" the headmaster's voice brought him out of it. He nodded gratefully. "I'm back, Albus."

The face in the portrait smiled, but the eyebrows were knitted above eyes that hadn't twinkled in years. The corner where Dumbledore's picture hung was the only area that had been spared the flames. Tom Riddle had cast a shield to protect the magical portrait when he came here thirteen years ago. He'd wanted to talk to the only remaining vestige of his former teacher, to gloat over how they'd never detected the horcrux embedded in the Sorting Hat, the piece of his soul shrouded by the magical intelligence created by Godric Gryffindor.

"Was your plan a success?"

Harry nodded slowly, struggling against his memories. When the silent alarm charm placed on Helga Hufflepuff's cup was triggered, Voldemort quickly checked on the hiding places of the other pieces. When he found most of them missing, he massed his forces and stormed Hogwarts to retrieve the piece hidden in the headmaster's office. While Harry, Ron, and Hermione had been quietly searching Little Hangleton, their school was sacked and burned. Their first warning came at the end, when Voldemort's joy and relief burst through Harry's Occlumency shields like they weren't even there... and by then it was too late.

There were so few survivors of the Hogwarts Massacre that most of what they knew was based upon the positions of the bodies and what little the ghosts could tell them. Neville Longbottom, who took over leadership of the DA when Harry and his friends left, had led the

students out into the courtyard to help the teachers defend the school. From the number of slain Death Eaters, they appeared to have held their own. Finally Voldemort himself stepped in, and brought down the outer walls with horrifically powerful blasting curses, and the resistance quickly collapsed.

When Harry regained consciousness and the three of them Apparated to Hogsmeade, it was already over. He barely recalled their breathless terrified run to the smoking castle. Villagers were already picking through the ruins, desperate to find any survivors. They found Luna next to Neville in the centre of the courtyard. Their eyes were wide open and glassy, signs of the killing curse. Amongst the black-robed bodies in front of them was a familiar face. Harry stopped and stared at Bellatrix Lestrange, her mask thrown aside in her death agonies and most of her ribcage reduced to a red ruin. He hoped Neville realized before his end that he'd gotten the woman who'd tortured his parents to insanity.

He lingered there, not wanting to leave. There was another body he needed to look for, one he dreaded finding. As long as he didn't see it, as long as he didn't know for sure, he could maintain a little hope. Ron's strangled cry turned his blood to ice, but he couldn't let his friend face this alone.

Ron was on his knees in one corner of the courtyard, Hermione kneeling next to him holding his shoulders. Harry felt his feet moving, but he'd remember how long it took to walk that distance for the next thirteen years. His eyes were locked on the ground in front of his feet. As long as he didn't look up, as long as he didn't acknowledge it, there was a chance, a hope... Harry stopped next to Ron and looked up.

Ginevra Molly Weasley laid spread eagle on the ground. His eyes locked onto her face, ignoring the shredded robes, the bloody wounds, the signs that she had not died easily or quickly. Her face was pale, the spray of freckles across her nose vivid in the fading light... but she looked almost peaceful now, relaxed like she was only asleep. Harry had only gotten to see her sleep a few times. After they'd started dating in his sixth year, she'd once dozed off with her head in his lap while studying in the common room. The crease

between her eyebrows flattened out, and her lips relaxed into a soft curve. He remembered staring at her for hours, his textbook forgotten, until she shifted and woke up embarrassed. He stared at the face of the girl he loved, knowing that she would never wake. No prince could kiss death away.

His next clear memory was sitting on a bed at The Burrow, staring at the end of his wand, knowing that it would only take two words to make it all end. Thinking about Ginny's disgust with him if he let Tom win helped him put the wand down and go to sleep.

"Harry?" Dumbledore said softly.

Harry shook himself, pulling himself back from his memories. He wasn't surprised to find himself sobbing. He found himself doing that more often this past year, since he'd started travelling alone. He hadn't wanted to worry Hermione, and it made Ron uncomfortable, though in the end he understood better. He took another deep breath to steady his voice. "You were right; someone with the Americans was feeding him information. The plan worked."

Since the collapse of the English Ministry, along with most of the European Ministries of Magic, the American Department of Magical Affairs deployed several divisions of their war-mages in an expeditionary force. Their commander was given orders to do whatever was necessary to 'contain the situation' and keep the Dark Lord East of the Atlantic. At first, the green troops were no match for the battle-hardened remnant of the Death Eaters. However, they learned quickly and were soon able to liberate the larger cities, though the cost was high. Diagon Alley was left a smoking ruin before the last Death Eater fell. The only thing the well-equipped Yanks couldn't handle was Voldemort himself. Military-grade curses that should have turned him into charred meat either missed or had little to no effect. As the death toll mounted, Harry reluctantly made contact with Alexander Hastings, the American general, and explained the convoluted tale about his role in the war and the prophecy.

The Americans were helpful, and the relief they brought to his countrymen, Wizard and Muggle, was welcome – even if it came too

late for most of the people Harry cared about. Unfortunately, as he continued to use the curse bond from his scar to search for Voldemort, his quarry had become more and more elusive. Their Occlumency and Legilimency duels were practically a nightly occurrence, almost always ending in a stalemate. Though Harry could get little more than glimpses of Voldemort's surroundings, sometimes that was enough to make a guess about where he was located. The maddened wizard still struck, seemingly at random, but he always left before Harry could arrive. After raiding another of Voldemort's bolt holes, which showed signs of having been vacated just minutes earlier, Harry and Albus began to wonder if there was a leak among the Americans.

The trap was crude, but effective. Harry, covered with blood and screaming in pain, Apparated into the American encampment. He talked deliriously, but quite loudly, about being injured by something in the dungeon of ruined Hogwarts. Once he was alone with the healer, he ruthlessly stunned the man and performed a memory charm. Harry had no idea who was giving information to Voldemort, so he wasn't taking any chances.

The rest of the encampment was treated to a loud argument between the head medical officer and a very stubborn Harry Potter. The latter walked out of the infirmary with a large bandage wrapped around his head, and swatches of gauze showed through the rents in his filthy robes. While the medi-wizard lectured him about brain trauma and depleted magical reserves, Harry yelled back that he'd found out that something crucial to ending the war was located near his parents' house in Godric's Hollow, and nothing would stop him from retrieving it now.

Harry then Apparated to a location near Tom Riddle's latest lair in Surrey. Ignoring his scar, Harry sent tendrils of Legilimency into the surrounding area. The gossamer thin wisps of mental energy detected the brooding malevolent intelligence that lurked within the townhouse. He sat quietly while the faint echo of smug superiority flared up and then completely disappeared. Harry quickly approached the now-empty building. The door was a solid mass of alarm and detection spells. Harry smiled grimly as he pulled out a set of picks.

He remembered the long-dead twins showing him how the pick locks the Muggle way.

Harry found the Sorting Hat on a table in the basement. When he picked it up, the rip near the brim rippled. "You know what you need to do," it whispered. There wasn't time to try and unravel the hellishly complicated magics bound into the hat, and the school that was the focus of its existence was no more.

"I'm sorry," he said as he carried the hat outside.

"Don't be," it said. The lips curved into what Harry swore looked like a smirk. "That was really a clever plan. I still say you would have done well in Slytherin."

"Maybe so," Harry agreed as he set the hat down and stepped back, raising his wand. "Thank you," he whispered. Then he blasted the hat out of existence.

Tom was still tearing into the ruins of the house where Harry had been born when the anti-apparation barrier suddenly went up. "Ah, Potter," he drawled as the filthy muggle-lover appeared before him, "I was worried you'd gotten splinched trying to get here." His eyes travelled from the wand clenched in Harry's fist to the bulky bandage wrapped around the younger man's head.

"Sorry," Harry growled, "I had to make a stop in Surrey to talk to an old friend." His arm snapped up and he snarled "*Reducto!*"

Voldemort's shield charm was cast with plenty of time, but the pillar of white light from Harry's wand was blinding in its intensity. The curved wall of blue light fractured and Voldemort was forced back several steps. "You aren't as enfeebled as I thought," Voldemort sneered. "Good. I was hoping this wouldn't be boring."

Despite his tone, Harry could tell his foe was shaken by the destruction of the last Horcrux. He pressed his advantage, forcing the Dark Lord to stumble backward as he battered at his defences.

"It won't do any good to kill me, you know," Voldemort said as they crested a hill. "I've already won, I've killed everyone you care about,

Harry. They all died for you, and there is nothing you can do to help them now.” He patted the Sword of Gryffindor on his belt. The Dark Lord couldn’t wield it, but it was a trophy from the Hogwarts Massacre.

Harry forced himself to intensify the rate of his attacks, even as the words tore at him. Ginny would want him to finish the bastard, no matter what it took. Thinking of her made his heart lurch just like it did thirteen years ago and he knew what he had to do. He finally got a cutting curse past the Dark Lord’s guard and tore away a good piece of his shoulder. Voldemort fell to one knee as his wand tumbled to the grass.

Harry shunted aside the pain of his own injuries and thought about all he had lost during the war, starting with his parents. He thought about his friends, his teachers. He thought about the Weasleys, who’d become the second family he’d lost. He thought of Ron and Hermione who’d been with him from the start almost to the end. He thought of Ginny and the dam broke. He dropped his Occlumency shields and sent everything he was feeling through the link he shared with Voldemort’s mind. The grass in front of him was lit with a green radiance that he knew was coming from his scar.

Voldemort screamed as the emotional torrent swept aside his defences and ripped through his mind. His black soul withered in the deluge of love and grief as ‘the power he knew not’ gave him agony that made *Cruciatius* feel like a soft caress. Harry wondered if Voldemort was already driven mad by the time he was able to raise his wand and cast the blasting charm. He supposed it didn’t really matter.

“Harry? Did the plan succeed?”

Harry blinked dully as the old headmaster’s voice finally penetrated. “Yeah, yeah it did.”

“Then it is finally over,” the portrait said with relief.

“I guess,” Harry said quietly.

“I know, Harry, that we have suffered many grievous losses. Defending the light always exacts a high toll,” Dumbledore said



sententiously. At one time, it would have driven Harry wild, but now he'd come to understand that it was how the old man dealt with his own grief. His excessive formality helped him keep his own ghosts at bay.

Harry tuned the old man out and conjured a chair. He slumped down and sat with his head in his hands, elbows braced on his knees.

"Harry, you have done a great thing."

"Not really," the man replied absently, his voice sounding hollow even to his own ears. It was finally over. The war was over. Too bad there was no one left to celebrate.

"I think you should rest," the headmaster suggested, "thinks will look better when you've had some time to recuperate and gain some perspective on what happened."

Harry slowly shook his head, but nonetheless slowly rose to his feet. He laid his hand on the wall next to the portrait and a section of wall slid inward and to the side.

The headmaster's private quarters, adjacent to his office, were heavily warded and survived better than much of the remainder of the school. Professor McGonagall had not the heart to even touch the room during her short tenure as interim headmistress, and the fire had not even warmed the walls. The portrait told Harry and his friends how to open the door when they first explored the office to see what had survived.

Harry's eyes grazed over the groaning bookshelves. Dumbledore's private collection of restricted books was supplemented with everything that Hermione could salvage from the ruined library. Just thinking about her made Harry's eyes prickle and he looked away. He quickly stripped off his robes and took a quick bath. By the time he was clean, his limbs were trembling with fatigue. He was asleep the moment his head hit the pillow.

Harry Potter slept without dreams for the first time in well over a decade.

Harry had developed the habit, through the years of constant struggle, of formulating a 'to do' list each night as he performed his Occlumency exercises and prepared to sleep. That way, when he woke up, he could immediately start working and stop thinking about his dreams. At first Hermione had admired his industriousness, though later she seemed to realize he was using it as a distraction. At least she learned to let him deal with his memories on his own, instead of always trying to get him to talk about what had happened. Ron just thought he was crazy for leaping out of bed and immediately setting to work. In their last year together, after Hermione died, Ron was doing the same thing.

Today, he awoke with a strange sense of lassitude. He tried frantically to recall his list before he remembered that he didn't have one for today. Everything was done.

Finished.

*Oh Bugger.*

He stared up at the ceiling, willing himself not to think about the past. Should he leave the country? Europe wasn't in much better shape. America was a possibility, but he knew there was little chance of being left alone. Enough word had filtered back with the fleeing refugees for them to understand who Harry Potter was. They might even try to lock him up or at least refuse him entry, reasoning that someone like him could be dangerous.

Besides, he'd spent the best years of his life in Scotland, and Hogwarts was the closest thing he could call to home. Of course, 'home' was a burned out hulk, but one couldn't have everything. Harry's train of thought was derailed by his stomach growling, reminding him that he hadn't eaten anything since breakfast yesterday.

Sighing, he retrieved his wand from the night stand and conjured a simple breakfast of tea and toast. One could subsist a while on conjured food if you weren't picky about nutrition. Or taste. After a while, one's memories of what food really tasted like began to fade, and the examples produced from that memory became even more

tasteless. Harry's toast was remarkably similar in taste and texture to cardboard, but it quieted the growling of his stomach.

When he finished eating and stood up, Harry winced. He accumulated a fair number of nicks and scrapes during the previous day, and he was covered with dark blue bruises. From the deep ache in his chest and the fatigue that already weighed him down, he guessed he also had a pretty bad case of magical exhaustion as well. He made his way to the bookshelves and grabbed a couple of books at random, then settled back onto the bed to read. He also didn't really want to talk to Dumbledore just yet.

The last four years had seen a dramatic change in Harry's study habits. With Hermione gone, it had been up to him to research new spells and ways to stop Voldemort. Ron was an excellent strategist, but he was the less scholarly of the two. Also, the death of his common-law wife had left Ron a bit less able to concentrate than his equally grief-stricken best friend. Harry was only able to focus by conducting mental discussion about whatever he was reading with his bushy-haired friend. Just imagining her lecturing them about the latest thing he'd read had helped him keep it together. In some way it was his private tribute to the smartest witch he'd ever known.

On one particularly bad night in an abandoned inn, Ron angrily demanded to know why Harry was smiling as he read an old book they'd scavenged from Flourish and Blotts. Harry looked up at his furious friend and found himself explaining his conversations. Ron just stared at him for the longest moment and said "You're barmy" and walked away from the fireplace. Harry followed his friend into the darkness. He could barely make out his friend's large frame in the dim light, and when he put his hand on the redhead's shoulder, he found it was shaking. Harry turned him around and saw tears pouring down his friend's face. Harry hugged him while his friend cried for the first time since The Burrow was burned down.

Harry took a shaky breath and swiped at his face. He couldn't seem to stop crying, and he felt like he was falling to pieces every time he turned around. He needed to pull himself together if he was going to get over this. A small voice in the back of his mind asked if he really wanted to get over this. Harry wondered for a moment if he'd retained

an echo from Voldemort through their connection, or if maybe he was hearing from that part of himself that wanted to die after they'd found Ginny's body.

Harry gritted his teeth and opened the thickest of the books he'd pulled down from the shelf, "Essays in Advanced Theoretical Thaumaturgy, vol. MCXII". Soon Hermione's voice echoed through his mind, explaining how the interaction of precisely-timed cheering, calming, and confusion charms could be used to treat certain variety of psychological disorders.

It was on the second day of bed-rest and reading that it came to Harry. Something about that last article had piqued his interest. He went back and read it again, trying to see why it had grabbed his attention. It seemed to be a purely theoretical exercise in temporal translation theory, and both the author's notes and the abstract indicated that it was published solely as an arithmantic exercise and proof of theorem. Harry read back through the equations again, trying to channel Hermione's brilliance as well as her voice.

The formulas dealt with conjuring the balanced spatial tensions required to create a temporal shift. The focus of the dynamic interface would be a curved field, the parameters of which would be dependent of the magnitudes of the forces involved. Any object that crossed through this curved field would experience a temporal translation, the magnitude of which would also be varied as the interacting forces were altered.

The reason why this exercise was a purely theoretical one was due to the energy requirements. Relativistic mass is a function of mass and velocity squared. The energy required for a temporal shift is a function of time travelled and mass taken to the infinite power, or basically infinity minus one. Anything with actual mass interacting with the field, even a molecule of air, would instantly consume all of the energy and collapse the field.

Once he was fairly sure he had a grasp of the theory, Harry wondered why he even thought it was useful. Yes, if he could go back in time, or just send word, a lot of misery could have been avoided. But even a simple parchment with a warning message to Dumbledore

would be far too massive. The article was quite clear that vision was not possible across the field, nor was any sort of scrying or divinatory magic. There would be no way to communicate.

How could anyone possible send information without any mass, and not using magic? Hell, how many things did he know of that had no mass anyway? Harry pummelled his 'inner Hermione' with questions. He knew somehow this was dreadfully important. Something in this article had seized his attention and made him feel something he hadn't felt in a long time.

Hope.

Finally, at the dawn of his third day, Harry decided to leave his sanctuary. He needed food that hadn't come out of wand, and he needed to talk to his former mentor.

"Harry, this is very interesting, and I'm glad to see you are finding ways to occupy yourself in a profitable fashion. However, I don't understand why you are so enthusiastic about this article," Dumbledore said as he frowned down at Harry from the portrait after he read the article aloud.

Harry got up from his conjured chair and began to pace as he thought. It was a habit he'd first developed while revising in the Gryffindor common room. Thinking about those days made his stomach twist, as the entire Gryffindor tower had been blasted and collapsed during the sacking of Hogwarts.

"I understand the power requirements make any ordinary use impossible. But what about transferring something that has no mass?"

"From what I read, they found that spells could not cross the barrier without being disrupted as well," the headmaster replied. Harry didn't have to look up to know that the blue eyes were starting to twinkle again. The portrait of his mentor hadn't had much opportunity for magical theorizing, and he could tell it was something the professor enjoyed immensely.

“True,” Harry said, looking up. “But what about memories, spirits... souls?”

Dumbledore adjusted his half-moon spectacles as he thought. “No, I’m afraid an astral projection spell would still carry enough magical energy to disrupt the field.”

“What about...” Harry’s voice trailed off. “What about magic that moved the spirit from the body as a side effect? If the spirit was... moving on its own...”

Dumbledore frowned. “Harry there isn’t a spell that I know of for moving spirits out of bodies. Unless you...” his eyes widened. “My dear boy, you don’t seriously propose to...”

Harry was lost in his own musings, staring off into space. “Curve the field around my body, and then use Avada Kedavra. Hopefully, if my spirit departs, it will interact with the field... and then?”

“Harry, you can’t mean to...”

“Albus,” Harry’s voice cracked like a whip. “If my spirit were to suddenly appear in a time when my body was alive, what would happen?”

“Harry, this is not a...”

“Albus, I’ve fulfilled your prophecy. If you ever gave a damn about me, not the bloody Boy-Who-Lived, but me, Harry James Potter, then answer the bloody question,” Harry snarled. The silence stretched between them like a bottomless abyss.

The headmaster’s portrait looked down. “Theoretically, Johanssen’s Principle of Conjoining would apply, and the spirit would be reabsorbed into the body, similar to a Muggle who nearly passes away and reports and out of body experience. That’s where Karl originally got the idea you know. It’s a very fascinating story, how he came to...”

“Thank you, Albus,” Harry smiled. The headmaster wasn’t going to distract him quite that easily.

“Harry,” the portrait said quietly. “What you are proposing is unbelievably foolhardy. You’re going to kill yourself, hope your spirit will physically move through the field, hope the temporal field behaves as you think it will and transports your spirit to the past, and hope that your spirit will be drawn to your body. This isn’t a plan, Harry, this is little more than guesswork and good intentions.”

“I suppose it is. But you said ‘hope’ three times. I haven’t had any hope for a long time,” the young man replied, sighing.

“Harry,” Dumbledore said, growing a little exasperated for the first time Harry could remember. “You won. Voldemort is dead. You have the rest of your life to live, not to throw away...”

Harry snapped. “The rest of my life, you say? What the hell do I have to look forward to? Everyone I ever loved, everyone I ever gave a damn about is dead! Every place I cared about is in ruins! I don’t have a single reason left to go on.”

“Harry,” Dumbledore responded, getting his emotions back under control. “Many people have given their lives to defend you, to make sure you survive. To throw that away now is to dishonour everything they sacrificed.”

“They didn’t do it for me,” Harry replied coldly. “At least most of them didn’t. They did it for *The Boy Who Lived*, their weapon to destroy Voldemort. And if you’ll recall, I didn’t ask anyone to die for me, not even your precious Order of the Phoenix.”

Dumbledore sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger. “I’m sorry, Harry. I didn’t wish to bring that up in such a fashion. I care about you and I don’t want you to throw your life away. In time, your grief will pass. That is a lesson I learned long ago.”

Harry sank down into the chair again. Arguing with the headmaster’s portrait was just as exhausting as arguing with him when he was alive. “I don’t think I have that much time,” he said slowly, his face in his hands. “I came close to killing myself after what happened here. I’ve had to talk myself out of it a few times each year, and it gets a little harder every time. Stopping Tom gave me a goal to work toward, but

now I have nothing left.” He looked up again. Albus had gone as still as a Muggle portrait. “I might as well make it possibly count for something.”

“Harry,” the headmaster said softly, “I have never regretted my passing more than I do today. You are too alone now, and there is nothing I can do.”

Harry took a deep breath and willed himself to maintain his composure. “You can help me with this.”

“Very well,” Dumbledore said. He frowned. “There is also the consideration, if everything works correctly, of how your actions will affect causality.”

“I have thought about that,” Harry said straightening up. The hardest part of the conversation seemed to be over. “Either my travelling back will change this reality, hopefully for the better, or it will create an alternate reality. Or if Hobson’s Paradigm is correct, my temporal journey will deposit me in an alternate reality where time has not progressed as far. Anything,” he said emphatically, “is better than living here.”

“If your spirit merges with your past self, you will be effectively eliminating your own awareness or that of your younger self. Is that not the same as murdering your younger self?”

Harry sat in thought for a moment. “If I knew that giving up my existence meant a chance to save them, I’d do it in a heartbeat. I’d do it when I was younger as well. I haven’t changed that much, Albus.” He smiled faintly.

The headmaster wasn’t quite done. “You do understand that you will be effectively resurrecting Tom Riddle?”

“If I do,” Harry allowed, “it will be a small price to pay for the lives of everyone who died in this war. Fighting him again is nothing, if I have a chance to do it better this time.”

“Do it better, Harry?”



"I plan to cheat like Draco Malfoy on a potions exam," Harry replied, smiling grimly.

After his magical reserves were replenished, Harry Apparated to the American Expeditionary Force's encampment. After they first arrived, Harry and Ron made contact with the war-mages, and struck up a loose alliance. After seeing some of what Harry was capable of doing over the course of the following two years, General Hastings had no difficulty in treating the haunted young man as an ally.

In a closed meeting with the white-haired general, Harry explained his suspicions about some of Voldemort's escapes, and apologized for the subterfuge with the medical wizard. Hastings was annoyed at first, but grew chagrined as Harry repeated Voldemort's comments that confirmed the younger man's suspicions. When he told the American that Voldemort was finally gone, the man let out a vast sigh and offered Harry a shot of something called 'Jack Daniels'.

After they downed the shots, Hastings bluntly asked Harry what he planned to do next.

"I plan to go away. Somewhere nice and quiet and hopefully peaceful," was all he said.

"I'm glad to hear that," Hastings replied amiably. "I imagine there are people in Washington who are going to be even happier to hear that."

Harry just shrugged. Comforting warmth was spreading from the pit of his stomach. It almost made up for the burning in his throat.

"You know, you could probably run for King right now if you wanted to," Hastings mused, a sly look in his eye. "There's not much left of the old government, magical or non-magical. You just offed the next best thing to the Anti-Christ. With everyone who considers you a genuine hero, you could write your own ticket."

Harry's face took on an expression of utter horror. He scowled as the American General broke down laughing and slapping his knee.

"Good Lord, boy, you should have seen the look on your face! Go on and enjoy your nice quiet life. But if you ever get bored with it, look

me up. I'll notify Washington that they can start the relief efforts now that damn madman is dust."

Harry shook his head as he stood up. He sketched a crude approximation of an American Military salute and Apparated back to Hogwarts.

It was over a month before Harry's preparations were complete. He filled reams of scavenged parchment with equations and notes. He wasn't sure if he'd have been able to finish the calculation without the headmaster's aid. Fortunately, the Hogwarts dungeons were relatively undamaged, though the books were starting to draw dampness and go green with mould. Nevertheless, Harry found the materials and tools he needed to prepare the prisms that would define and maintain the temporal field.

When taking a break or while eating meals, Harry talked to the headmaster's portrait. They mainly talked about the past, and how things came to happen as they did. It was a bittersweet time for both of them. Harry had long ago forgiven the headmaster for the things he had and hadn't done. For his part, death had also brought a note of humility to the Supreme Mugwump's worldview. In the end, they had to agree that Albus had tried his best to make sure things worked out, even if it had ended badly. Now it would be Harry's turn.

The grief that normally came from talking about long-lost friends was tempered by the fact that there was a small chance that he might see them again. Indeed, if he were mistaken in his assumptions, he'd suddenly find himself seeing a lot of people again – though he'd also have some serious explaining to do. When he looked at his options like that, Harry almost felt like he was in a 'can't lose' situation. The only fate that truly frightened him was growing old alone in world filled with despair and grief. Sharing that observation with Albus shocked him at first, but after a while he seemed to understand, and his assistance in Harry's project became noticeably more enthusiastic.

After they quadruple-checked his calculations, Harry carefully and deliberately burned his notes, retaining only the final sheet with the precisely calculated prism layouts. They both agreed that this sort of magic was not something to leave lying around. Harry also wrote out

a short note for General Hastings and pinned it to the sleeve of his robes.

“Hastings may come to see you some day, Albus. He’s done all right by me. I suggested he may want to keep you around as a local advisor.”

The headmaster’s portrait looked up at Harry curiously. The boy smiled faintly.

“I don’t want to leave you sitting here alone until you mildew. If what I do doesn’t alter this timeline, then, well, you can probably help a lot with the reconstruction.” Harry paused and then continued in a rough voice, “Maybe you can tell people about a wonderful school that was built to share the knowledge of magic with each new generation as they grew up.”

“Harry, no matter what happens here, I know you will make a positive impact no matter where you go. I want you to know that the small help I’ve given you through the years has been one of things I’m most proud of doing with my life.”

Harry stared at the portrait for a long moment. “It was more than a small help.”

“Goodbye Harry. I wish you well on your next great adventure.”

“Goodbye Albus. I wish you the same,” he said as he Disapparated from the damaged office for the last time.

Number Four Privet Drive was exactly identical to the properties on either side and across the street, a fact that the Dursleys were intensely proud of. Of course the fact that the houses were all burned-out ruins was something to be less happy about.

As Harry poked through the rubble, he felt a guilty twinge of relief that the house was unrecognizable. He’d gone through some very bad times with his aunt’s family, and he needed no reminders of that now. Theoretically, the temporal transit should occur at roughly the same spatial coordinates. Harry’s plan had enough unknowns that he didn’t want to push his luck. So he wanted his spirit to appear in the past as

close to his physical body as possible. With that in mind, he calculated his arrival for the middle of August, 1991. That far back, it was difficult to pick an exact day to arrive, and his Uncle's panicked flight in July made it tricky to make sure his body would be near Privet drive when his spirit arrived. Harry would have like to have gone a little farther back, but the temporal field would have required even more energy to establish, and he had to make sure he had enough magic left for one spell; one very powerful spell.

Harry found a relatively clear spot near the front door and next to the remains of the stairs. He cleared away bits of charred wood and began to set the prisms on the floor. As he positioned them, he used measuring charms to check the spacing and the angle of each one. He had to get this absolutely perfect the first time. The article suggested that even if the energy problem were solved, a 'temporal' charge was likely to accumulate during transit. This was why the farther back you wished to focus the temporal transit field, the more energy it required as well. If he didn't do this right, there was no chance of trying it again – the energy build-up would be too great.

Harry set the last prism in place and recast all the measuring charms. After re-checking everything with his chart, he lit that on fire as well. When the parchment was consumed, he pointed his wand at each prism in order and cast the energizing charm. As each prism began to glow, adjacent crystal wedges were joined with threads of light. When all the crystals were charged, an elongated hemisphere sprang up around Harry. He peered closely at the three-ply fields that enclosed him. The first and third fields formed a barrier that kept the air away from the second field. The modified bubblehead charm worked perfectly; otherwise the transit field would have collapsed from trying to send a random atom of atmosphere nineteen years into the past.

Harry took a deep breath as a deep weariness set into his bones. There was only one spell left to do, and then it would all be over. He set the tip of his wand between his eyes and thought of Ginny. Her memory had kept him from doing that after he lost her... now he would do this to get her back.

Harry pushed aside that thought and focused on how many people he'd lost over the years, how many he'd let die. The spell required

true hate to cast. Fortunately, Harry had more than enough self loathing.

*“Avada Kedavra!”*

As the blinding green light swept over his eyes, Harry Potter heard a rushing sound and knew no more.

Sometimes when the body knows death is imminent, it will react reflexively, even if it is useless. Struck by the spell, Harry’s back arched, throwing his arm wide. His wand, holly and phoenix feather, eleven inches, flew from his slack fingers. The instant the tumbling wood struck the glowing barrier it collapsed the field...

...and Harry James Potter, the Boy Who Lived, fell to the ground, dead.

A/N – Okay, had the idea for this come roaring into my head while I was working on Blackwand Chronicles and it wouldn’t leave me alone until I started working on it.

And yes, this thirty year old Harry is **very** emotional. He’s just lived through pretty much his worst nightmare.

## Chapter 2

Harry woke from his nightmare, screaming at the top of his lungs.

“Dammit Boy, stop that racket this instant!” Vernon Dursley’s voice boomed through the door.

Harry went limp, eyes staring blearily up at the ceiling. His head hurt so badly it felt it had been split open with an axe, like in one of Dudley’s video games. “Am I dying?” he whispered aloud. He wondered if he’d had a stroke, like they talked about on his Aunt’s favourite hospital shows. He didn’t feel like one side of his body had gone numb. In fact, both sides of his head ached abominably.

He lay flat on the bed and tried to slow his breathing. As he closed his eyes, images began to flash again. He saw people fighting and dying. He saw red eyes glowing at him from the darkness, hate burning like a fire. He didn’t recall ever seeing a show on the telly about people fighting with wands, so he wondered if the dream had come because of his trip to Diagon Alley with Hagrid.

He smiled as he thought about the immense, rough-spoken man, the first adult wizard Harry had ever met, and really his first real friend. Even as he pictured the man’s beetle-black eyes and bristling beard, he also saw the man’s face gone slack and pale, the eyes staring glassily into infinity. Harry’s stomach contracted into a small hard ball as he realized he was seeing Hagrid dead. The boy shivered and clutched as his thin, ragged pillow.

“It’s just a nightmare,” he whispered to himself, “a really, really horrid nightmare.”

Maybe if he kept repeating that, he’d start to believe it.

Nightmares or not, Harry was up early cooking breakfast before Uncle Vernon went off to work. It was hard to focus though. He kept seeing images from his dream, most of which were quite disturbing. He almost dropped the frying pan as his Aunt swept into the kitchen to see why breakfast wasn’t ready yet.

“Be careful, you stupid boy!” she snarled. “You’re just as careless as your worthless parents!”

A cold draft seemed to blow straight through Harry’s chest, freezing the air in his lungs. He set the pan aside and spun around. Petunia Dursley was used to dealing with her unwanted nephew; she was used to sullen obedience, grudging respect, and general avoidance. She was not, however, used to cold rage.

“My parents were *not* worthless. My father was a star Quidditch player and my mother was one of the best Charms witches of her generation. If you weren’t so bloody jealous of her and her relationship with my father, you wouldn’t feel the need to make up petty lies.”

The blood could not have drained from Petunia Dursley’s face any faster if she’d had her throat cut.

Harry blinked as she turned and left the kitchen at close to a run. What had possessed him to say such a thing? He didn’t know his parents at all. Hagrid told him his mother and father had been Head Girl and Boy at Hogwarts, but no details beyond that. And that last part... he knew from what she’d said in the shack by the sea that his Aunt had been jealous of her sister’s talents. But she said nothing about being jealous of Lily’s husband, his father.

And yet Harry’s words had stopped her in her tracks.

He shook his head as he put the bacon back on the burner until it sizzled properly. He brought the food out to the dining room and served everyone. Aunt Petunia was white-faced and silent, while Uncle Vernon glared at him and Dudley just looked confused. Harry slid the remaining bacon and eggs on his plate and ate quickly in the uncomfortable silence. He got the washing up done in record time as well and retreated to his room. On the way, Harry filched a couple of aspirins from the lavatory medicine cabinet and washed them down with tap water. Once he was back in his room, he checked his owl’s cage and made sure her water dish was full.

Harry sat on his bed, face in his hands, and elbows on his knees. As he took a deep breath, he remembered sitting in a chair in a similar

fashion while arguing... with a portrait? The memory felt recent, like it was from something he'd done this summer, but parts of it were all wrong. He had a ton of aches and pains. But Harry couldn't recall ever getting hurt that badly, even by Dudley's gang at school.

Giving up trying to figure it out, Harry lay back down on the bed and closed his eyes. The headache was fading now, and if his Aunt continued to avoid him, he might get a chance to rest.

When Harry awoke that afternoon, his headache was lessened, but his nightmares had been, if anything, even worse. When he stumbled downstairs, his Aunt was sitting quietly in the living room. She didn't look at him as he told her he was feeling ill and wouldn't be down for supper, but just nodded her head.

Skiping supper was no hardship that evening, as his appetite was nonexistent. He couldn't recall ever feeling so sluggish and weak, except perhaps the time his Uncle struck him in the kitchen and he hit his head on the oven as he fell. This was different though. "Is this magic?" he whispered in the darkened room. It was still hard to think of the place as his bedroom, his place was the cupboard under the stairs. Taking a shaky breath, Harry settled back down onto the pillow and let the darkness claim him.

What happened next was like no dream he could ever recall.

Harry found himself sitting in the spare bedroom again. The chair was pulled away from the desk and a strange man was sitting in it. He was very thin, and looked incredibly tired and haggard. Lank black hair fell across his face and his eyes were shadowed. He stared at Harry; shock etched onto his features, and then wearily scrubbed at his eyes.

"I should have expected this," the man said finally. "Too much natural resistance for this to have gone smoothly. Anyone who can throw off the Imperius at fourteen would not make this easy." His face twisted into a grimace, "Maybe it's better this way, rather than forced."

Harry tried not to stare as the odd-looking man talked to himself. He was used to strange dreams that didn't make a lot of sense at the



time, like flying motorcycles and flashes of green light. But he'd never had a dream figure that ignored him to talk to itself.

The man glanced at Harry and let out a sigh. "I'm not explaining this very well then, am I? Look, Harry, have you met Hagrid yet?"

The boy nodded eyes wide.

"Good, then I didn't botch that part. You're getting ready to head off to school, right?"

Harry nodded again.

"Right then. You're going to love Hogwarts, and it will become a home away from home for you. More home than you ever had here with the Dursleys." The man's voice went hard and Harry's mouth dropped open. His Aunt and Uncle were usually brilliant at keeping up appearances in front of the neighbours. How did this man know what went on? Harry felt his face grow hot with shame.

"None of that," the man said firmly. "It's got nothing to do with you and everything to do with them. They've earned themselves a special place in hell for what they've done to you."

Harry took a shaky breath and tried to make himself accept the man's words.

"Don't worry about it. It'll take time and someone a lot more persuasive than I am to make you believe. Anyway, you're going to enjoy your time at Hogwarts, and the friends you make there, but things will not always be good."

Harry just looked at the man calmly as he appeared to gather his thoughts.

"There's quite a bit that going to happen, and some of it is very bad. The man that killed your parents is going to come back, and he's going to kill a lot of people. Some... some of the people he kills will be your friends, people you've come to... come to love."

Harry felt the blood drain from his face. He didn't know you could go into shock in the middle of a nightmare. "W-why are you telling me this?" he whispered. "How do you know all of this?"

The man looked at Harry for a long moment, and he realized the sunken eyes were a dim, murky green. Finally, his visitor pushed back the hair on his forehead to reveal a very familiar scar in the shape of a lightning bolt.

Harry stared at the man for a long moment. He opened his mouth and said the first thing that popped into his mind. "But how? If *you're* me, why aren't *you* wearing glasses?"

The man smiled for the first time, a slow, sad grin that made Harry's stomach seem to twist painfully. "Hermione -, uh, one of my, or maybe our, friends you're going to meet at school, developed a vision charm that corrects for nearsightedness. She got tired of my glasses getting knocked off at inconvenient times."

Harry noticed the man was blinking rapidly and his eyes were a little shinier than they had been. "It doesn't turn out very well, does it?" he asked.

"No, I'm sorry to say it doesn't. I won in the end, but everything was destroyed and everyone I cared about... died. Afterwards, I realized that there was nothing left for me, so I used some really advanced magic to take my... spirit... out of my body and send it back to this time. I can give you my knowledge of what is going on, what is going to happen. Hopefully, we can make a difference."

"You say 'we'," Harry asked cautiously.

His older self nodded. "The original plan was for our spirits to merge, which means our consciousnesses would meld as well. You will stop being just you, and I will stop being just me. We will become more of an *us*, I think." The man fell silent for a moment, and then continued in a softer voice. "I don't want to deceive you, Harry, if you agree you will not be the same Harry Potter you were. A lot of my memories are... not very pleasant."

The boy looked up at the man, eyes growing damp as well. "Will I really have friends at this new school?"

The man nodded and took a shaky breath. "Oh Harry, you are going to have great friends. You are going to have so many people love you that you won't be able to believe it."

The boy stood up from the bed. "Then I am not letting anything happen to them. Not if I can stop it." He stuck out his hand.

The man whispered as he took the boy's hand, "Somehow I knew you were going to say that." The man disappeared as an unseen breeze blew through the room.

Harry awoke with his skin burning like it was on fire. He bit back his cries as the pain faded. When he was sure he could move again, he sat up and swung his feet to the floor. He looked around at Dudley's abandoned storage room. It was the most beautiful thing he'd seen for years. He looked over at the Snowy Owl that was still staring at him. "I bloody did it, Hedwig!" he whispered fiercely, "it bloody well worked!" The owl didn't react to her name, and Harry reviewed his recent memories in confusion. "Oh, sorry girl," he said as he got up and opened the cage door. He stroked her soft head feathers, something his future self hadn't gotten to do for too many years. "How do you like the name Hedwig, girl? It's a pretty name for a pretty owl." The owl bobbed her head and rubbed her beak across Harry's knuckles. He gave her an owl treat and she hooted softly at him.

Harry sighed happily and looked up at the paper pinned to the wall that counted down the days until he left for Hogwarts. He still had nearly two weeks. The battered clock on the desk told Harry it was a little after two in the morning. Harry stood thinking for a moment before pulling on his battered trainers and sliding his wand under his over-sized shirt. Finally, his vault key and money bag went into his pocket. Harry slipped out of the house with the stealth he learned at a young age from trying to avoid his relatives.

Harry stood on the darkened kerb, the moon just beginning to peek around the clouds, and held his wand up. He stared at it for a moment, surprised to see smooth wood, unblemished by the scorch

marks and nicks his memory showed him. He jumped as the Knight Bus appeared with a loud bang.

“Leaky Cauldron,” Harry said coolly as he paid his fair. A slightly younger Stan Shunpike than he remembered from his third year took his money. Harry avoided the young man’s eyes and made his way to a sliding bed before anyone noticed his scar.

Once he got off on Charing Cross road, Harry walked into the tavern and cut through to the back wall with purposeful strides. He avoided meeting anyone’s eye as he cut through the pub. He had his wand out and was tapping the bricks before he heard a voice behind him. “Hey Tom, who’s the lad?”

This late Diagon Alley was quite different. Many of the shops were closed, though a few stayed open. The streets were almost deserted, and the few figures that were still abroad were wrapped in dark cloaks. Harry felt horribly exposed in his ill-fitting Muggle clothes, but he kept his wand tightly clenched in his fist and marched down the centre of the lane. He didn’t really want to be interrupted, so he summoned up the scowl he first developed as Quidditch Captain for the Gryffindor team. He just hoped it didn’t look completely laughable on an eleven year old.

When he arrived at the large white marble building, he was relieved to see that his deductions were correct. Gringotts was open for business, though only a few workers were on duty. Goblins, commonly living underground, were a lot more flexible about their sleeping schedules than humans. Also, the fact that some of their customers had an aversion to daylight almost guaranteed they would stay open late, if not all night long.

Harry walked up to the nearest available goblin and nodded politely. “I’d like to visit my vault, and ask a few questions about my account.”

The goblin looked at him curiously, but gestured for Harry to follow. After another rollercoaster journey through the tunnels, Harry unlocked his vault with the key Hagrid had given him. This time he scooped out a larger pile of galleons. He knew this vault would be refilled by the family vault if it ever became depleted. The Potter Family vault would be inaccessible to him until he was seventeen, the

age of majority in the Wizarding world. He hadn't even been aware of its existence until the owl from Gringotts reached him the day after his birthday. Harry never stopped being frustrated by the things that had been kept secret from him, but *this* time it would be different.

The only complication lay in finding a way to use his foreknowledge without revealing too much of what he knew. If the ministry knew he had knowledge of the future, Fudge would have him locked away and drinking Veritaserum until they drained him dry. Merlin only knew what Fudge would do with the information. Albus had also cautioned him about changing the past too far too quickly. If the course of events deviated too far from his memories, then his foreknowledge would become useless. Harry knew he had to use his memories with care, but he didn't want to be paralyzed with indecision either. As they rode the cart up to the surface, Harry decided to be as subtle as possible and see what results that obtained.

Once they were back in the lobby and he'd exchanged some galleons for pounds, Harry turned to his guide. "Did my parents leave anything beside money? Any papers, journals? I have so little to remember them by," he added wistfully.

The goblin did not appear to be comfortable dealing with emotional humans. "I believe there is a family vault, and some investments, but by the terms of your inheritance I'm afraid you will not be able access them until you are of age."

"Really?" Harry asked, feigning surprise. "Would it be possible to speak to the account manager?"

"Why would you wish to do that?" The goblin asked suspiciously.

Harry shrugged nonchalantly, though later he imagined the gesture looked somewhat odd coming from a child. "I have a few general questions about how it is being handled. I also have to consider whether I may want to move my assets once I am old enough," he replied coolly.

The goblin's eyes widened. It wasn't often that a junior employee got the opportunity to receive the blame for a multi-million galleon

account being lost to one of Gringotts' overseas competitors. "I will see if Goldfarb is available," he said quickly and scurried off.

Within minutes Harry was escorted into a comfortable conference room with an extremely fat goblin who wore a plaid waistcoat and had a tiny pair of gold-rimmed spectacles perched on the bridge of his bulbous nose. "Mr. Potter," the goblin rumbled, inclining his head without smiling.

"Master Goldfarb, may your gold always flow," Harry replied with a slight bow. He'd interceded between the American military forces and a group of surviving Gringotts employees after the 'liberation' of Diagon Alley. While he helped them salvage what they could from the destroyed underground vaults, Harry had picked up a smattering of Goblin language and customs.

Goldfarb's eyes widened for an instant, surprised at hearing a formal greeting from a wizard, let alone such a young one. "How may I assist you today?" he said politely, eyeing the youngster.

"I was only recently made aware of my family vaults, and the fact that *you* manage my family's investments."

"That is correct," Goldfarb replied carefully, obviously wondering where this was going.

"Have you any means of investing in Muggle businesses?"

The goblin blinked. "Er, yes, we have done so on certain occasions. It is not usually done however."

Harry pondered his options for a moment. "I will be frank with you, Guardian of My Vaults," he said, using a formal Goblin title that denoted great respect and trust. Goldfarb inhaled and straightened in his chair at that. "I live with my uncle, a Muggle who hates my kind. He obtains his livelihood from a Muggle manufacturing company named Grunnings. I would consider it a personal favour if my entrusted portfolio were to include a controlling interest in this company."

“You wish him dismissed from his post for revenge?” Goldfarb asked, but it wasn’t really a question.

But Harry shook his head, making the goblin raise a gnarled eyebrow. “I wish leverage, not vengeance. There have been... incidents. I want a way to end those.” Harry looked thoughtful for a moment. “If they... continued... and something happened to me, my uncle’s family constitutes my sole remaining relatives. Were they to gain control of my assets they would immediately withdraw them and place them in a Muggle institution.”

Goldfarb said nothing for a moment as his nostrils dilated. “As your account manager, it is my duty to promote a balanced investment strategy. I have noticed that your holdings in the Muggle sphere are rather sparse,” the goblin said in a formal voice. “You will receive notification by owl once we have acquired a controlling interest,” he added quietly.

Harry nodded and immediately got up from the table, a gesture of respect implying that he didn’t wish to waste any more of Goldfarb’s time.

Harry stepped out into the darkened street and looked around. The figures wandering around this late didn’t appear to be paying him any special attention, but he still felt like someone was watching him. He quickly made his way to a disreputable-looking second-hand clothing store near the entrance to Knockturn Alley. It was still open, and he was able to pay more than he should have for a shortened black hooded cloak. He felt a little more confident now, as he made his way back to the Leaky Cauldron. It wasn’t immediately obvious how young he was – and a short figure in a cloak could be anything from a dwarf to a goblin. No sane person wanted to accost a goblin in a deserted street in the middle of the night.

Harry wore the cloak all the way back to Privet Drive. He took it off and rolled it up under his arm as the Knight Bus stopped in front of number four. He nodded as he pushed by Stan and scrambled to the curb. The cuckoo clocks on the bus mostly agreed that it was somewhere around half past four, and he was knackered. Harry stuck his wand inside the rolled up cloak and slowly let himself into the

darkened house. He was almost betrayed by a creaky floorboard, but remembered it just in time.

The boy stretched out on his lumpy mattress with a sigh. He had to get up and cook in little more than an hour, but he'd slept most of the previous day. He slowly closed his eyes and dropped off for a few minutes.

The fire burned unnaturally bright, and even at this distance the skin on Harry's forehead was hot and tight. He and Hermione had hold of Ron's arms, digging their heels in as they tried to hold back the larger man.

"Let me go!" he screamed.

Hermione was sobbing incoherently as well. Harry finally found his voice and got his friend's attention. "I'm sorry, Ron. We're too late. She-she's gone." His voice trailed off into a whisper as Ron's knees buckled and he collapsed onto the dirt path.

"Mum!" he sobbed as tears rolled down his face. Hermione knelt in front of him and hugged his face to her chest, comforting him.

Harry looked away and watched The Burrow burn.

Harry sat up so quickly he nearly fell off the bed. He grabbed the marred headboard to steady himself as his head continued spinning. *I did not need that!* He thought as he crossed his arms over his contorting stomach. *I do not need to be throwing up right now either. Get it together, Potter.*

He imagined Snape sneering at him for his weakness and an icy chill ran through his veins. The boy reminded himself that he needed to figure out what he was going to do about the potions master. As he pondered his options, he was ashamed to admit that cold-blooded murder was not immediately eliminated from the list. *At least that damn mind-raper won't be picking through my thoughts and memories this time around.*

He still kicked himself sometimes about the implications he had not realized when he discovered that Snape was a master Legilimens. All



those times he'd taunted Harry about being a glory seeker, all those times he'd blamed Harry when Draco sabotaged someone's cauldron... he'd been able to see into Harry's mind. He knew Harry *didn't* crave attention and fame. He knew Harry *wasn't* responsible for all those sabotaged potions. He *knew*... and still he punished Harry and made his life a living hell whenever possible. At that point he should have realized there was no way someone so evil and vindictive could have been truly working against Voldemort. He should have killed him on the spot. There would have been trouble, more than he'd ever had to deal with before, but Dumbledore wouldn't have been killed. With the headmaster alive, Voldemort would never have dared to attack the school. A life sentence in Azkaban would have been well worth it.

Harry shook his head violently, whipping away the cobwebs of sleep and memories. He got up and put another tick on his sheet of paper. He had less than two weeks to plan what he needed to do. His face resolute, the boy marched down to the kitchen to start preparing breakfast.

Between meals and chores, Harry made it a practice to absent himself from the Dursley's house at every opportunity. Not that Aunt Petunia minded. Since his outburst, she tended to avoid him as much as possible. Reading his mother's journals from the Potter Family vault after he turned seventeen had paid unexpected dividends.

So each morning he'd walk toward the play park and as soon as he was out of sight, call the Knight Bus. Harry made several shopping trips to Diagon Alley and other parts of London. He took great pains to make sure he wore the hooded cloak when visiting the Alley. He didn't want random "Harry Potter Sightings" to be reported in The Daily Prophet and start people asking questions.

During his excursions to Muggle London, Harry was tempted to buy some clothes that actually fit, but he refrained. He wanted people to believe him when he finally told them about the Dursleys, so he didn't want to do anything that would suggest he was being well treated in any way. Instead he purchased books on psychology, martial arts, and fencing. The latter two would be useful as references, and to supply cover for any skills or knowledge he might accidentally let slip.

The psychology books were the most important. He needed to change how things happened this time. He couldn't very well said to eleven year old Ron and Hermione, "you two will become lovers before you turn twenty, so stop arguing and be nice to each other." There was also the matter of what to do about Ginny.

They talked a lot during the brief period of time they'd had after they'd gotten together. She told him she'd never really given up on him. The fact that she'd waited more than five years for him to get his act together both disturbed and amazed him. There was no way in hell he would be taking her for granted this time, but he also needed to help her with her shyness around him. What she told him about the aftermath of her time in Chamber of Secrets also haunted him. He just didn't know whether he needed to be there for her, or try to prevent it altogether. How far could he alter events without making them unrecognizable?

Thinking about meeting Hermione and the Weasleys on September first both elated and terrified him. He couldn't wait to see them alive again, but at the same time he was worried he'd muck it all up.

Eventually, the last mark on the paper was ticked off. The morning he was to leave for Hogwarts, Vernon, Petunia, and Dudley piled into the car and left. They were taking Dudley to London for some elective surgery to remove the pig tail Hagrid transfigured onto Harry's spoiled cousin. They left without a word about Harry's departure, which was fine with him. Harry remembered that he had to mention needing a ride to King's Cross the first time around.

Once they were gone Harry dragged his trunk down the stairs. With the extra books and his smaller size, it was quite a chore. He opened it up and pulled out a sack from a Muggle luggage store. After propping up the end of the trunk opposite the pull handle, he clipped a pair of rollers onto the bottom edge and tightened the screws. "This isn't nearly as good as a shrinking charm," he said aloud, his voice echoing in the empty house, "but it'll do for now." With that he ran back upstairs to get Hedwig's cage and checked to make sure he hadn't missed anything.

If the ever-dreaded neighbours had anything to say about Harry pulling a trunk, complete with caged owl on top, out to the curb, they didn't choose to express themselves.

The Knight Bus brought Harry to the train station by ten, a good hour before he had to leave. He chose to wait on the Muggle side of the nine and three quarters barrier, figuring that asking how to get through was just as good a way to introduce himself to his second family as any other. After a few minutes of staring up at the clock and fidgeting, Harry became bored. He hopped off his trunk and pulled out one of his Muggle psychology books to re-read. Try as he might, he couldn't pay attention to the words.

He was terrified.

Meeting the Weasleys was the best thing that ever happened to him, but beginnings were such delicate things. One wrong word, one wrong move...might result in a bad first impression. Losing his friends wasn't nearly as bad as watching them die, but what he did over the next few hours could make or break him. Added to that was the fact that he was going to deliberately try to change some things. He wanted to shore up the foundations some of his relationships were built on, but he wasn't sure if he was doing the right thing. Would this backfire and make things worse? Did he even have the right to do this? Was he just manipulating the people he claimed to love?

Harry took a deep breath and closed his eyes. His Occlumency exercises were good practice for getting his emotions under control again. As his heartbeat began to slow, Harry tried to sort out his concerns in a logical fashion. The Weasleys had always considered him family, especially since the start of his second year. They did that the first time around, when Harry had no prior knowledge of the future. This time around, he would just be... extra considerate. He'd be a better friend, that's all. He knew someday he would have to tell them of his journey back, and how things turned out the first time. To be honest, he was dreading that conversation. Until that happened, he'd just have to try and do the best he could with what was available. Harry nodded to himself and opened his eyes. A line of red-headed people was starting to enter the train station. He stowed his book

back in the trunk and began to work his way toward the gap between platforms nine and ten.

Harry hung back as the Weasley matriarch directed her older boys through the barrier. Just hearing her voice again was music to his ears. He had to swallow twice before he could speak and Ron was already heading toward the barrier.

"E-excuse me," he said, damning his voice for shaking. "I... was wondering how you get through...?"

Molly, peering worriedly after Ron's progress, hadn't heard him at first. However, a soft voice answered him. "I can show you," it said. He turned and stepping around her mother was Ginny Weasley.

Harry had wondered how he'd react to seeing her again for the first time. By 'react' however, he hadn't anticipated massive cardiac arrest. His heart gave such a thump he was amazed he hadn't deafened everyone in the station. Her face was rounder, with a few traces of baby fat, but he could still see the lines of the beauty she'd become. He could feel the trunk handle quivering in his hand and struggled to get his emotions back under control. Hadn't he been practicing Occlumency just a few minutes ago? He grumbled as he felt the blood rushing to his face.

At least her cheeks were a little pink as well, Harry noted. "Er, sure." He swallowed. "I'd really appreciate that," he said in a clearer voice.

"Follow me," she said, taking his free hand and leading him through the crowd. It was an innocent gesture, but it took all of Harry's willpower not to squeeze it like he never wanted to let go.

When they drew near the metal barrier she turned back toward him. "My brothers all told me about this before. You just run toward the wall like it's not there. It helps if you close your eyes first."

Harry made a show of nodding thoughtfully. "Okay, you're the expert here," he acquiesced.

Her face grew a little pinker at the comment, but she turned and walked quickly toward the barrier. Harry didn't follow her advice, but

instead watched her as she walked through the wall. He followed her through, and smiled as he saw the Hogwarts Express.

Harry turned toward his guide, just in time to see her mother emerge from the wall behind them, a small smile on her face. "Well, you were right," he said, smiling. "I owe you one. By the way, I'm Harry. Are you coming to Hogwarts as well?"

That was evidently the wrong question. She looked down, "I'm Ginny. I'd like to come, but I'm too young yet. Mum says next year."

"Well, it's good to meet you, Ginny," he replied, but her eyes stayed downcast and he could see her face getting pinker. Harry racked his brain for a way to keep this going. He saw Ron and the twins heading their way when it came to him. "Could I possibly trouble you for another favour?" he asked quietly.

She looked up at him, puzzled.

"Well," Harry began with a sheepish expression on his face. "I have this owl now, but no one to write to. You see, I was raised by Muggles, and not terribly nice ones. They said I'm not to allow Hedwig anywhere near their house. Anyway, I have a lot of questions about how they do things in Wizarding houses, things most of the other students have been around since they were born. You don't er, suppose I could write you and ask you a few questions, you know if something comes up? I don't fancy looking like a berk in front of everyone in my classes, and you obviously know all about stuff that everyone takes for granted..." he looked away a little uncomfortable.

"If-if you think that would help, I don't mind," she said shyly.

"That would be brilliant," Harry said, smiling. "If you want, I'll tell you all about what goes on in my classes, so you'll know what to expect."

"I'd like that, Harry," she said.

He smiled at her again. This was going better than he expected. "Well, I hate to cut this short, but I'd better get my stuff on board."

She nodded and started to turn toward her mother.

“Don’t worry though,” Harry said smiling, “I’ve already got half a dozen questions for you.”

Ginny pinked up again, but she was still smiling as she went back to Molly.

Harry worked his way down the train, knowing it was full almost all the way to the back. He smiled seeing Neville looking for Trevor. That was another friend he didn’t want to see waiting five years to come into his own. Eventually Harry made his way to the last compartment, and began trying to stow his possessions. Hedwig’s cage wasn’t a problem, but Harry’s trunk was even heavier this time. *I really need to build up my strength*, was his exasperated observation, *I’m getting really tired of being a bloody weed*.

As if on cue, one of the twins appeared like last time and they helped him get his trunk into the compartment. When they were done, one of them peered at the scar on his forehead and let out a low whistle.

“Blimey,” the other one said, “e looks like-“

“I think he is,” the other one said.

“What?” Harry asked stupidly.

“You’re Harry Potter!”

“Yeah, I guess I am. Wait a minute,” Harry said, narrowing his eyes. “There’s two of you.”

“Really?”

“I hadn’t noticed, mate.”

Harry took a step back and made a horrified face. “Y-you’re not the infamous Weasley twins are you?”

Fred and George looked at each other in confusion.

“They warned me about you in my Hogwarts letter,” Harry continued in an accusing tone. “Where is that slip of parchment? Never mind, I

remember what it said. 'Notorious pranksters, approach with caution, do not touch, eat or drink anything they have been near!'" Harry resolutely clasped his hands behind his back and edged away from the confused red-heads.

"Oi, brother of mine, I think—"

"—our reputation has begun to get—"

"—a bit out of hand. Especially if the headmaster is—"

"—including warnings about us—"

"—in official school correspondence."

"Too right, brother of mine."

"Unless Mister Potter is having us on."

"There is that."

Both of them turned and stared at Harry.

"Would I kid a Weasley?" Harry asked innocently.

"Brother of mine," the one on the left began.

"We have been had." Finished the one on Harry's right.

"Good one, Harry!" They both said in unison. The one on the right stuck out his right hand, while the one on the left stuck out his left hand. Harry didn't miss a beat and shook both simultaneously. The twins smiled at each other and exited the compartment.

Harry settled down next to the window and listened to the Weasleys begin to make their goodbyes. He smiled when Fred and George immediately revealed who he was, even before Percy got there. This time Ginny didn't ask to get on the train to take a look at him, which made him smile even wider.

Ron evidently used the confusion to escape his mother's ministrations, and boarded the compartment while she lectured his brothers about not asking poor Harry what You Know Who looked like.

"Mind if I sit here?" his future best friend asked.

"Not at all," Harry replied with a smile. He still had a smudge of black on the end of his nose. "I'm Harry."

"I'm Ron." The boy peered at him for a second, and Harry waited for Ron to ask to see his scar. "Why did you want to talk to my sister?"

*Things were already starting to happen differently,* Harry noted as he stumbled over his prepared answer. He wondered about the open window behind him. The conversation outside seemed to have dropped off. "Well, er, she was really nice and helped me get through the barrier."

Ron frowned slightly. "Everybody knows how to get onto the platform," he scoffed.

Harry didn't comment on how Molly seemed to feel he still needed watching to make sure he got through okay. "Well, I didn't," he said, fighting the urge to snap at the boy. Ron had always been a bit thick at times. "And she was kind enough to offer to show me how." Harry thought about the open window again and added in a louder voice. "Besides, she's awfully pretty." Harry swore he heard a quick gasp that was almost submerged in the crowd noise.

Ron stared at Harry with something akin to horror. "You're daft, you know?"

"Do you know you've got something on your nose?" Harry replied smiling.

Percy showed up at this point and Harry and Ron smiled at each other as the twins proceeded to heckle their older brother mercilessly. Ron kept surreptitiously peering at him until Harry simply lifted up his fringe so Ron could see his scar. The boy flushed a little but still leaned forward to look. Harry was tempted to use his Legilimency to see what he was thinking, but he drew the line at using it on his



friends. During the war, he only used it on enemies, potential hostiles, and to communicate with allies who also possessed the skill. Harry was tempted, but knew that he needed to set some limits and stick to them.

As the train set off the twins leaned out the windows to wave goodbye. Harry leaned out the next window, ostensibly to look around.

“Don’t cry, Ginny, we’ll send you loads of owls.”

“We’ll send you a Hogwarts toilet seat.”

“George!”

“We’ll get Harry to autograph it.”

“Fred!”

“We’re only joking, Mum.”

Ginny was laughing and running along the platform as the train picked up speed. Harry raised his hand and waved to her, and he saw her wave back before the train rounded the corner. Harry smiled as he settled down in his seat again. He wouldn’t be able to see her for almost a year now, but at least he had built a good start. He sighed and wondered how many letters he’d end up writing this year.

Ron was still looking at him funny.

“I’m really glad to be getting out of town,” Harry explained.

“I heard you were sent to live with some Muggle relatives. What are they like?”

Harry sighed. “Not too bad, except for the fact that they hated my parents and wish I’d died with them.”

Ron made a choking sound.

Harry shrugged. “They can’t stand the whole idea of magic, and thought if they beat me often enough, I’d decide to be normal,” he said bitterly.

“That’s awful,” Ron said in barely more than a whisper. At one time the look of pity in his eyes would have angered Harry, but he’d grown past that. He also hoped that giving Ron as unvarnished a look into the life of the Boy Who Lived would kill any jealousy issues before they even got started.

Ron tried to cheer Harry up by describing the downsides to being the youngest son in a family full of brilliant wizards. As he listened to the boy’s litany, Harry wondered if he could do something about Ron’s sense of inferiority compared to his brothers. That was something even more delicate, but Harry didn’t really want to wait until fifth or sixth year for him to finally get over with it. Ron needed to find his own identity and get comfortable with it. He settled for commiserating about not having money, and told Ron stories about the awful hand-me-downs he’d gotten from Dudley over the years.

When Ron pulled Scabbers out of his jacket, Harry jerked back with a hiss. Sitting asleep in Ron’s hand was the bastard who’d betrayed his parents to Voldemort. It took a moment before Harry could get his hands to stop shaking. It would be so easy to kill him now, but Merlin knew what it would do to their time line.

Ron flinched back, cradling his pet protectively against his chest. Harry noticed his reaction and started apologizing. “Sorry about that Ron, you just, kind of startled me. I’ve had a couple of bad experiences with rats, wild ones you know. It just took me by surprise. My aunt and uncle, they, well, never mind.”

Ron looked apologetic. “Sorry, I just didn’t think, I-“

Harry held up his hand. “Nobody got hurt, so I think we should stop apologizing to each other.”

Ron smiled, a little sheepishly, and they got past an awkward moment.

When the woman with the snack cart came by, Harry was hit by an inspiration as he again purchased a wide variety of sweets. Ron’s ears went pink and he muttered about having brought sandwiches. Harry looked at him out of the corner of his eye and asked what kind.

Ron unwrapped the package and made a face. "Corned beef," he sighed.

"Really?" Harry asked happily. "That's my favourite!" He looked down at the sweets on the seat next to him and frowned. "I don't suppose you'd be willing to take some of this junk for one your sandwiches, would you?"

Ron looked at Harry like he'd gone mental.

"Damn, I suppose not," Harry sighed, grinning ruefully. "Can't blame a bloke for trying, can you?"

Wide-eyed, Ron handed him a sandwich. Harry gleefully shoved a handful of pastries and cakes toward his friend, and then dug into the sandwich with obvious relish. He was glad he'd bought a bottle of pumpkin juice, because it was a bit dry. On the other hand, he'd gotten out of the habit of eating a lot of sweets after everything had gone to hell in the future, and Molly Weasley's cooking was something he'd loved, even if it was just a leftover sandwich.

Harry ended up trading the majority of his goodies for three of Ron's sandwiches, and acted like he'd still gotten the far better deal. Ron held onto the last sandwich and chewed it slowly, staring at Harry all the while.

"I suppose it makes sense, with as many boys to feed as your Mum has, she'd have to be a fantastic cook," Harry said thoughtfully. "I don't know what she does differently, but her corned beef tastes a lot better than mine."

"You know how to cook?" Ron asked, a little incredulously.

Harry shrugged. "My aunt and uncle make me do most of the cooking and cleaning. It's not like I had much choice. I think that's a big part of the reason why they didn't want me to know about Hogwarts. My cousin won't do any chores, so they're going to be stuck while I'm away." Harry smiled a little vindictively while Ron shook his head.

Soon they were both full and just nibbling. Ron explained about the Chocolate Frog cards and Harry stuck the Dumbledore card he'd

been given into a pocket. He might need to drop that clue about Nicolas Flamel at some point in the future.

They were sampling the Bertie Botts Every Flavour beans when Neville stuck his head into the compartment, asking if they'd seen his toad. The boy looked depressed when they said they hadn't, so Harry spoke up. "I think there is charm you can learn to summon things. That might help out next time he goes on walkabout."

Neville brightened a bit at that, and then left to resume his search. Ron was just getting ready to try and turn Scabbers yellow, a colour which Harry felt to be highly appropriate for the rat, when the door opened again and a very familiar bushy-haired girl asked if they'd seen Neville's toad.

Having already seen two of his oldest friends that day, Harry was better able to control his reactions this time. It was probably just as well that he'd run into Hermione last. She tended to pick up on things other people missed.

After Ron's spell failed to turn Scabbers yellow, Harry decided to try and smooth out some first impressions.

"Are you sure that's a real spell?" Hermione asked. "Well, it's not very good is it? I've-

"Ron," Harry interjected, "did you get that spell from Fred or George?"

"George," Ron answered with dawning comprehension.

"Your brother was just winding you up, mate," Harry confirmed.

"Well, that wasn't very nice of him, was it? Trying to make his brother look foolish is just mean," the bossy girl fumed.

*At least she's being bossy on Ron's behalf this time,* Harry thought with a laugh. He watched Ron's eyes get wide as Hermione went off on a rant about how hard she was working to learn magic, and George's joke was just like all the myths that surround magic in Muggle society and make it harder for someone new to the art to understand what was really going on. She concluded with "-and that's

really a sore point for me as nobody in my family is magic at all. My name's Hermione Granger, by the way. And you are?"

"Ron Weasley."

"Harry Potter."

"Are you really?" she asked in a delighted tone. "I read about you in *Modern Magical History*, *The Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts*, and *Great Wizarding Events of the Twentieth Century*."

"Don't believe everything you read," Harry practically growled. He did end up reading all those books eventually in the future, and each one of them was laughable wrong on the major points.

Hermione blinked. "Why ever not?" she asked, sounding almost appalled.

"Books still have to be written by people, Hermione," Harry said gently. "They say that history books are written by the victors. The only person that was there that night and is still alive is sitting right here, and I sure haven't given any interviews, mainly because I'm not even sure what happened. So how could they honestly claim to know?"

Hermione looked a little stunned as she drank this all in. One of the less endearing traits she was starting to develop is the habit of depending on her books first and foremost for everything. Hopefully the seed Harry planted today would help her to recognize that blind spot before it came back to bite her too many times.

"Well, that is something to think about. Are you hoping to get sorted into Ravenclaw, Harry? I'm hoping for Gryffindor, that's where they say Professor Dumbledore was sorted, but Ravenclaw wouldn't be too bad I suppose."

Harry shook his head. "My Mum and Dad were both Gryffindors, so that's where I'll go. Ron too."

"How did you know that Harry?"

*Damn, I got to watch myself*, Harry stopped himself from wincing just in time. “Ron, everyone’s heard of the Weasleys: Red hair, lots of boys, and too damn brave to end up anywhere but Gryffindor.”

Ron ducked his head to cough, but Harry noted his ears had turned a delicate shade of fuchsia.

“Well, I don’t have any family traditions to guide me here,” Hermione fretted.

“I heard someone say that if you really want to go into a particular house, and make your desire clear during the sorting process, it will almost always send you to that house.” *Let them think I heard it from a parent today*, Harry mused, *rather than coming out of my own mouth a life time ago*.

The girl looked thoughtful for a moment, then thanked them and left to continue searching for Neville’s toad.

“I’m not sure I’m too crazy about her being in the same house with us, Harry,” Ron said slowly, staring at the closed door.

“I am. I think she’ll be right handy when we’re revising.”

“You’re already talking about homework? Harry, we’re not even to Hogsmeade yet!”

“Ron, I have to take it pretty seriously. If *you* flunk out, you go back home to your mother’s cooking. I’m not so lucky; if *I* flunk out I go back to hell with the Dursleys.”

Ron made a face at Harry’s remark about how lucky he was. “She still seems kind of mental to me,” he said stubbornly.

“You mean when she was getting mad about George tricking you with that fake spell? Ron, she was getting mad on your behalf you know.” Harry stopped and cracked an evil smirk. “Maybe she fancies you?” he asked.

Ron choked and coughed. “Harry, that’s not funny,” he gasped.

“No funnier than you harassing me about talking to your sister.”

Ron let out a quiet snort. “You’re an odd duck, Harry.”

*You have no idea, old friend*, Harry thought sadly. There was still such a long way to go.

A/N – I was pretty gratified by the response I got from the first chapter, so I didn’t want to leave anyone hanging.

And now to answer a few questions posed about chapter 1:

Is Harry going to try and change things?

A: Yes, absolutely. That’s the whole reason he risked total annihilation to go back in time.

How did Harry keep air molecules from intersecting with the temporal field?

A: And I quote “He peered closely at the three-ply fields that enclosed him. The first and third fields formed a barrier that kept the air away from the second field. The modified bubblehead charm worked perfectly, otherwise the transit field would have collapsed from trying to send a random atom of atmosphere nineteen years into the past. “ In other words, the first and third layers are airtight, and the air molecules between them were evacuated before the transit field was established.

Why did Harry insist on using such a powerful spell to kill himself if he needed so much power for the temporal field? There are plenty of other spells which cause near instant death, and although they unlike the spell you have him using can be blocked that wouldn't be a consideration. For that matter a potion or poison or a gun or... Would work just as well.?

A: The critical factor here is making sure nothing that touched the transit field. Reducto (bludgeoning curse) or Diffindo (cutting curse) may not kill him instantaneously (even with a head shot, the heart may continue beating for a few seconds) and would more than likely scatter little pieces of Harry in different directions. A single drop of

blood would be more than sufficient to destroy the transit field. Avada Kedavra immediately evicts the spirit from the body, leaving it a lifeless shell. It also leaves the body intact, and doesn't continue traveling after it has snuffed the life from its target. A gun would lead to the same problems as the more physically violent curses. Poison (unless Harry has access to some nasty military-grade WMDs) would likely render the recipient unconscious prior to killing him or her. An unconscious Harry falling into the field and disrupting it, then expiring from the poison would lead to a much shorter story, but less satisfied readers. )

On the subject of Muscle Spasms:

A: Harry was anything but relaxed at the time. Mellow people cannot cast the killing curse. "Harry pushed aside that thought and focused on how many people he'd lost over the years, how many he'd let die. The spell required true hate to cast. Fortunately, Harry had more than enough self loathing."

B: Harry was expecting to crumple to the ground like the (all too many) people he has seen struck by Avada Kedavra. Unfortunately, Harry was little to no background in forensic pathology and was unfamiliar with how the body can involuntarily react when it knows death is imminent. Fortunately, his departed spirit moved significantly faster than the wand did.

C: As far as gripping versus releasing when having a muscle spasm goes, which way it goes depends on the sizes of the opposing muscle groups and the intensity of the nerve stimulation.

5. "Why didn't Harry simply use legilimency to contact his younger self?"

A: And I quote: "The article was quite clear that vision was not possible across the field, nor was any sort of scrying or divinatorial magic. There would be no way to communicate." That would include legilimency as well.

"I don't particularly care with whom Harry is matched, as long as it's not Malfoy or Snape and he has a chance being happy"



A: I don't generally have much to do with Slash, as it is really a major departure from the character as I see it. (Same way with making a gay character straight for a story – you basically have an OC with the same name as a canon character and that's it.). As far as pairings go, I'm probably going to stick with canon as of HBP. Harry could conceivably go off the reservation with his foreknowledge, but the whole point of his journey is the re-establish those cherished relationships. Harry's also noticeably less likely to take any crap from certain parties this time around, a fact which a pair of Slytherins may soon become painfully aware.

My nephew has a birthday party this weekend, so I may not have another update for tomorrow night, depending on schedules. Hope you enjoy this, and let me know what you think, and if there are any particularly painful episodes from the canon books that you feel Harry should try to "fix". )

### Chapter 3

Harry relaxed a bit as he and Ron talked about safer topics: Charlie and Bill's careers, the attempted break-in at Gringotts, and, inevitably, Quidditch. Hearing his friend talk about their favourite sport was like coming home again after a long journey, and Harry didn't have to feign a happy smile.

He was caught completely off guard when Draco Malfoy, along with his bodyguards Crabbe and Goyle, entered the compartment.

Mentally kicking himself for dropping his guard, Harry had tremendous difficulty controlling his rage. The blond ferret before him directly contributed to Dumbledore's death. There was no proof one way or the other whether Draco participated in the Hogwarts Massacre, but the cruelty of some of the wounds inflicted on Ginny's body made Harry wonder. It was all he could do to stop himself from pulling out his wand and obliterating the Death Eater in training.

"Is it true?" the boy asked, eyeing Harry. "They're saying all down the train that Harry Potter is in this compartment."

"That would be me," Harry replied in a low voice.

"This is Crabbe and Goyle," Draco said, gesturing at the two hulking boys. "My name's Malfoy, Draco Malfoy."

As Ron coughed, Harry growled "I know who you are."

Draco glared at Ron. "I can see you've been hanging out with the wrong sort. Some Wizarding families are better than others, and you don't want to make friends with the wrong sort. I can help you there," he said coolly, extending his hand.

Harry just glared. "The wrong sort? You mean like former Death Eaters who bribed their way out of Azkaban? You didn't want to help me when we were in Madam Malkin's, but now that you know my name everything's changed. I'll make my own friends, thanks."

Draco's eyes widened like he'd been slapped and an angry flush rose from the collar of his robes. "You'd better watch what you say, Potter,

or you'll end up like your parents. I can see how hanging around with a Weasley would degrade your manners though. They're a poor excuse for family, and I do mean poor."

Ron sprang to his feet as Harry's fist crashed into Draco's jaw. Crabbe and Goyle just stared in shock as Draco fell backwards into the corridor. The two hulking boys reached for Harry but Goyle let out an explosive breath as Ron charged into him, driving the top of his head into the larger boy's stomach and knocking them both to the ground.

Crabbe's meaty hand engulfed Harry's shoulder, spinning him around. Harry went with the motion and locked his hands around the boy's wrist before he could even begin to throw a punch. Still turning, Harry crouched down as the boy's arm was stretched across his shoulders. A moment later, Harry jerked forward and the larger boy was pulled off his feet and landed in the middle of the compartment with a loud thud.

He spun toward Goyle just as the enormous boy was trying to pin Ron underneath his bulk. He stiffened in agony when Harry kicked him hard in the lower back, right over the kidney.

"Let him up before I break your skull," Harry hissed. Goyle flinched again and unwrapped his hands from around Ron's neck.

"Should have known you'd fight like a filthy Muggle, Potter," Draco snarled from the doorway. He was standing again, but clutched at his jaw with one hand. The other hand held a wand.

"If you want to escalate things to that level, go ahead," Harry said in a soft voice. His wand was still in his trunk, but he didn't really care. "I'll even give you the first shot." He stared directly into the pale boy's eyes. "Just remember that you have a choice to make of what to do with your life. And also remember that I was a baby when I destroyed your father's master. Choose wisely, Draco."

Draco's eyes were wide as Crabbe and Goyle dragged themselves out of the compartment. He stood there, unmoving, as the door slid shut again.

Harry turned and helped Ron to his feet. The red-headed boy was rubbing at his bruised neck as he sat down again. "Blimey, Harry, where'd you learn to do that?"

"Read it in a book about Muggle martial arts. I can loan it to you if you like." Harry neglected to mention some of the combat training his older self had received from the Order of the Phoenix. Ron had been his sparring partner for years. This time around, he'd like to get a head start on training like that if he could.

Ron nodded eagerly as Hermione pushed the compartment door open again. "What's been going on in here? You weren't fighting with those boys, were you?" she asked. "You'll be in trouble before you even get to the school!"

"Hermione," Harry said in a long-suffering tone that made him feel nostalgic for some reason, "we didn't start it. Draco Malfoy came into our compartment and insulted both our families. He started it, and we finished it, all right?"

"Seriously," Ron added. "My dad's told me about the Malfoys. They supported You-Know-Who during the war, and then turned around and said they'd been bewitched. Dad said that Malfoy's father didn't need an excuse to go over to the Dark Side." Ron frowned for a moment. "Hermione, be careful around Draco. You said your parents were Muggles, and the Malfoys think people like you shouldn't be allowed at Hogwarts."

"That's perfectly ridiculous," Hermione said crossly, glaring at Ron.

Ron looked down. "That's what my dad says too." He coughed. "I mean, he thinks the Malfoys are ridiculous for saying that." His face was getting redder by the minute.

"My Mum was Muggle-born," Harry said, trying to help Ron out of the hole he'd dug, "and she was Head Girl when she finished school."

"Really?" Hermione gasped as her eyes widened.

She looked so surprised that Harry frowned. Then it dawned on him. He and Hermione had talked about many things, but her drive to

excel in her studies was such a part of her nature that he never questioned it. He knew it stung her when Malfoy and others would call her a Mudblood, but Harry wondered if she drove herself so hard because she felt she had something to prove.

"Well, I was raised by Muggles, so I'm practically Muggle-born too." Harry smiled. "We ought to all study together and pick Ron's brain."

Ron looked alarmed when Harry mentioned brain-picking, but reddened when he noticed Hermione eying him speculatively. "I don't know that much, really," he said. "Mum won't let me practice at home, not even cleaning charms or anything."

"Ron, it's not the spells, it the little details, like how do you heat water for tea? Is it a spell, or do you have magical appliances to cook with?" Hermione reassured him. "Think of it more like... one of those Muggle Studies classes I've read the second year students can take, only in reverse."

"Ginny said she'd help me too," Harry said quietly. "We can compare notes as well." He knew he wouldn't be able to hide his letter writing from his dorm-mates, so best to get it out in the open now.

Ron looked at Harry, frowning, but he didn't say anything.

"Goodness," Hermione said. "I forgot. The conductor said we'd be getting there soon. You'd better get into your robes!"

"Yes Ma'am," Harry said, chuckling. Somehow Hermione's bossiness didn't bother him nearly as much this time around.

Harry couldn't resist breaking into a huge grin when Hagrid asked him how he was doing. "He rescued me from the Dursleys and told me I was a wizard!" he explained to Ron. He wasn't going to keep any secrets he didn't have to. Harry already felt guilty enough about the way he was manipulating things. He was deep in his thoughts as they made their way down to the lake. *Remember the things Ron told you after Hermione died. He missed her so badly, his only regret was that they took so long to realize how they felt. There's no way he could have loved her so much in the future and not feel anything for her in this timeline. I'm just going to... help things along a little bit. When*

*everything is settled, I can always tell them everything and give them the option of hexing me. Maybe I am playing God a little, but I can't just do nothing and let things happen. I wouldn't be able to live with myself. Besides, we're going to need every advantage if we want to stop that ghoul before he starts killing everyone.*

Harry's thoughts cut off as they rounded the last bend and saw Hogwarts, perched on the mountain above the lake, lights glimmering from every window. His heart climbed into his throat and he felt like crying. Seeing the old castle, unburned and whole, was like finding another long-lost friend. Harry heard the sound of water drops pattering on broken stones, echoing out of his memory. He vowed that he would never let that happen again. Not to the first place he'd ever felt at home.

He was silent as he boarded the boat with Ron, Hermione, and Neville. The chubby boy looked nervous and afraid, nothing like the confident and grim-faced young man he'd left in charge of the DA. *I as good as killed him*, Harry thought to himself, *I owe him too*. "Longbottom..." he whispered.

Neville looked up from his frightened contemplation of the black waters of the lake.

"You parents are Aurors, aren't they?"

"Er, yes, well, they were..." Neville muttered, his voice trailing off. "I live with my gran now."

Harry hated to remind Neville of his parents in St. Mungos, but he needed to forge a connection here. "Sorry, Neville, someone... I think someone mentioned that your parents were friends of my parents."

Neville looked up, startled. "Gran says they were pretty popular."

"Well, I don't have any magical relatives, so I'm glad I got to meet you, Neville. Any idea where you'll get sorted?"

"Not-not really," Neville stammered. "I'm amazed I even got a letter."

“Well, the three of us are hoping for Gryffindor. I hope you get sorted there too.”

“I’m not that brave,” the round-faced boy whispered miserably. “I’m even terrified I’m going to fall into the lake.”

“But you’re still here,” Harry reminded him. “Being brave isn’t not being afraid. Being brave is being afraid and going ahead and doing what you have to do.”

Neville looked thoughtful, but didn’t disagree. Harry eased back in his seat and looked around. Ron was gazing out across the lake at the cave they were approaching, but Hermione was looking at Harry and frowning slightly. Harry began examining the cliff face they were approaching.

Everything after that proceeded as anticipated. Minerva McGonagall was the same as he remembered. A good heart, but scary as hell – he missed her nonetheless. At least this time around he’d try to do a better job in her transfiguration class.

He stood nervously with the other first year students, not wanting to join in the speculation about exactly *how* they’d be sorted into their houses. He didn’t trust himself not to reassure his new friends, and Hermione was standing right next to him, mumbling spells under her breath. If she was getting suspicious of him, the last thing Harry needed to do was draw her attention again.

Finally, they were led into the Great Hall, where the Hat was ready with this year’s new song. One by one, they were called to be sorted. Harry closed his eyes for a moment and made sure his Occlumency shields were up.

When his name was called, Harry ignored the cries from the older students. *That was getting bloody old the first time around*, he mused disgustedly. He sat on the stool and pulled the Sorting Hat over his head with some trepidation.

“Well, well, well, what do we have here?” a small voice asked in his ear. “I can sense you’ve already been sorted, but that’s impossible because I’d remember sorting the last of the Potters.”

*I imagine you would,* Harry thought sardonically.

“Yes, yes. So how did you... interesting.”

Harry strengthened his mental barriers as much as he could, but whatever the Sorting Hat was doing wasn't interacting with his Occlumency at all.

“It isn't often I run into something I haven't seen before, Mr. Potter. I see another Hogwarts, and another Hat. One you were forced to destroy.”

*Sorry, but I didn't have time to do it any other way. I had to do it quickly before Voldemort realized it was a trap,* Harry admitted. He still had some lingering guilt about destroying the hat in his original timeline, even though what he just said was the truth.

“No, I see the other Hogwarts was gone, and so its purpose had fled as well. Your plan is an audacious one; you seek to meddle with the workings of Fate itself.”

*Well, I had literally nothing left to lose,* Harry thought bitterly.

“True. I wish you well in this endeavour. Never fear, I will keep your secrets. The more who know the greater the risk.”

*Thank you. Er, would it be possible to ask for one small favor?*

“What favor is that?”

*Well, Hermione was already sorted into Gryffindor, and I know you'll put the Ron and his sister there as well. But there is a new student next year named Luna Lovegood. She'll be sorted into Ravenclaw, but she'll have a pretty bad time of it. She'll become a good friend, but I think the harassment from her own house was not a good thing for her. Could you possibly put her in Gryffindor where I can keep an eye on her?*

“I see what you remember. I will allow this, unless she is completely opposed to your house, which I doubt will be the case. Matchmaking



is at worst the most minor of sins, Mr. Potter, but are you prepared to deal with the consequences of your meddling?"

*It's what I came here to do.*

"Very well. Though I must congratulate you on a plan worthy of the most cunning Slytherin; I had best send you on to your future friends in GRYFFINDOR!"

Harry slumped as the Sorting Hat shouted the last word, and the table under the red and gold banner erupted in applause. He swept the hat off his head and placed it gently on the stool. He gave it a gentle pat on the brim as if to say thanks and ran over to the all too familiar table.

He shook Percy's hand with enthusiasm and laughed at the twins' cheers. He barely caught his breath before his eyes strayed to the High Table. He smiled faintly at the familiar sight of his professors, and tried not to think about the broken bodies pulled from a shattered Hogwarts. He swallowed convulsively when he saw the headmaster's brilliant blue eyes twinkling through his half-moon glasses. Harry frantically shoved all his strength into reinforcing his Occlumency shields again, and that had the desired calming effect.

Harry wrenched his gaze away just in time to hear Ron sorted into Gryffindor. He abruptly stood up and started clapping, making his palms sting as he gave vent to his emotions. The twins joined him in standing a moment later, and surprisingly, so did Percy. Another moment later Hermione and Neville, who was only now recovering from the shock of being sorted into Gryffindor, stood as well, clapping and cheering. Soon the rest of the table joined in as well.

Ron's face was almost purple by the time Percy shook his hand in an overly formal manner, but he was beaming when his brother showed him to his seat.

Harry hadn't been to a Hogwarts feast in almost fifteen years. After Dumbledore's typical abbreviated speech, he dug in with enthusiasm. He was determined not to be a scrawny little runt forever this time around. He was so happy to be there that he was hoping he didn't accidentally levitate the whole table. Harry actively concentrated on

his happiness. He didn't want to look around at his classmates, most of whom would meet terrible deaths. If he was going to do what he needed to do, he had to find a way to deal with his grief. He'd been alone for much of his early life, and the last year in his old life he'd been totally bereft of friends. This would be easier if he had someone he could talk to... someone to talk about what was *really* going on. His short conversation with the Sorting Hat made that abundantly clear. He'd just have to wait.

And maybe write a lot of letters.

As everyone grew full and dessert was served, Harry helped himself to a generous serving of treacle tart and listened to the buzz of half-remembered conversations around him. When he glanced up at the High Table and saw Professor Snape glaring at him past Professor Quirrell's turban, Harry felt a subtle probing at his Occlumency shields. It faded after a few seconds and he continued eating his dessert without being interrupted by a burst of pain from his scar.

Things were looking up for Harry Potter.

From the partially burned sign by the street, the building used to be a Muggle orphanage. Now it was a charnel house, reeking of wood smoke and burnt flesh. The three of them flew over on their brooms as soon as they saw the Dark Mark glowing balefully in the evening sky over Manchester.

Hermione, with Ron's help, overcame her nervousness about flying, and they tore across the night sky as fast as their brooms could go. For all the good it did them, they could have walked.

The Death Eaters were long gone by the time they got there, Apparating away to safe houses and pureblood mansions alike. They left nothing alive.

Still forms littered the lawn. A few of the more quick-witted children had tried to escape through windows or fire exits. Some appear to have jumped. All had been cut down by curses, Death Eaters probably laughing at their efforts to escape the flames.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione stood, rooted in shock and horror. The memories of the Hogwarts Massacre were still fresh, but this was even worse. At least someone had been able to fight back before. These children, some as young as four or five were completely helpless. Wizards and witches drunk on the power of Dark Magic tortured and murdered them for no purpose other than satisfying their own sadistic urges.

Ron and Hermione clung to each other, and Harry could hear one or both of them sobbing quietly. He stood there numbly until his eyes were drawn to a flash of red.

A breeze generated by the roaring flames stirred the hair of a little girl, no more than ten or eleven. Bright red hair spread out like a fan on the ground around her head, and glassy eyes stared up into infinity. Harry had a sudden urge to close them, but couldn't move his feet. He knew those eyes would prove to be brown. She looked just like Ginny had, all those years ago, lying on the cold stone floor in the Chamber of Secrets. But this girl wouldn't revive when he killed Tom Riddle's diary. She was dead forever, just like his Ginny...

Harry threw back his head and screamed. He brought up his wand in both hands, holding it almost like a sword. He doesn't even remember shouting an incantation before a massive bolt of lighting erupted from the end of his wand. Harry was blown backward off his feet, the tip of his wand smoking, as the Dark Mark was wiped from the sky.

Harry woke up with Ron shaking his shoulder hard enough to make his teeth rattle. He blinked and sat up. Neville, Dean, and Seamus were all gathered around his bed as well. Harry blinked for a moment before he realized he'd had a nightmare, and evidently woke everyone with his screaming. "Oh hell, I'm sorry, guys," he said miserably.

"Do you always have nightmares like that?" Ron asked in a quiet voice.

"Some-sometimes," Harry admitted shakily. "I've had them on and off for a while." *Like over thirteen years.*

“Is it because of You Know Who?” Dean asked quickly.

Ron shot him a furious glare, but Harry answered. “Yeah, it is.”

*I'm going to need to 'learn' silencing charms first thing*, Harry noted grimly. After reassuring Ron several times that he was okay, and that he didn't need the school nurse, the other boys eventually returned to their beds.

After a while, Harry got up and padded out to the common room. Fortunately, everyone else appeared to be asleep, preparing for the first day of the new term. Harry looked around at a room that had been such a fixture in his life at Hogwarts. He had to hurry through here last night, claiming to be tired to hide his reaction.

His eyes began to prickle, so Harry walked over to one of the deep-set windows and looked out across the darkened grounds. *I had no idea it would be this hard*, Harry mused. *It's just so... difficult... to see all the things I lost, and not show any emotion whatsoever. Merlin, this is going to be a long year.* He grimaced and leaned his forehead against the cold glass. After a moment he crept up to his dormitory and retrieved parchment and a quill from his trunk. There was little chance of sleep for him the rest of this night, so he sat down at the table nearest the fire and began to write.

‘Dear Ginny,’ he began.

Harry chronicled the train ride, the sorting ceremony, and most of the feast before dawn began to creep over the mountains. The steady scratching of quill on parchment was like a balm for his nerves. By the time he heard people stirring in the dormitories, he felt oddly calm, like he'd been drained of his excess emotions. He blotted the half-full page and placed it on the stack with the rest. Somehow writing it down helped almost as much as talking about it, with the added bonus that he could choose his words with care. He had to remind himself more than once that this was a much younger Ginny than he remembered, one who barely knew him – though he planned to change that as quickly as possible. For now, he would do his best to get to know her again, and let her see the real Harry Potter. If that didn't get her completely past her initial shyness, well, he'd cross that bridge when he got to it.

Harry folded the stack of parchment and carried it upstairs with him. His roommates were just starting to awaken, so he quickly shoved the partially-completed letter into his bag and went to take a shower.

The first week of classes was the same maelstrom of confusion he remembered. While Harry knew his way around a lot better than the last time, he also had to be careful he didn't display a suspicious degree of familiarity with the castle. Harry reacted to his teachers' introductions much the same as he did before, with one exception. Flitwick falling off his chair during the roll call still brought an embarrassed smile to his face, one that Ron shared this time. He was able to meet McGonagall's eyes a little better this time around, but Quirrell was as nervous and distant as before. Harry sighed, but he knew there was nothing really to be done for the Defense professor. His fate had been sealed in Albania when Voldemort possessed his body.

Snape was another matter entirely. Harry checked his Occlumency barrier for the fifth time Friday morning as they descended into the dungeon where the potions lab was located. At least the note from Hagrid asking him to tea that afternoon gave him something to look forward to. He stayed silent as he set his things on the table and prepared his parchment for taking notes. He looked up without flinching when the potions master swept into the room.

As before, the man started in on him during roll call. "Ah yes, Harry Potter. Our new – *celebrity*."

This time, Harry ignored Malfoy and his cronies. He locked gazes with the man as soon as he looked up at the class. Those black eyes were as cold and dark as he remembered, but this time he could detect the subtle thrust of Legilimency, probing at his shields. Harry maintained his barriers, but allowed a patina of uncertainty and doubt to creep through. Those were emotions he had in abundance, and would be less suspicious than a total lack of presence. The Occlumency books he'd read after Sirius' death in the Department of Mysteries claimed that some people were born with a natural gift for the art, and were almost impossible to read beyond basic emotional reactions.

A crease appeared between the professor's eyebrows as he held forth on the intricacies of potion making. It was his only reaction to being blocked out of Harry's mind. For his own part, Harry had to struggle to remain impassive. Knowledge that his father's nemesis had been rifling through his mind from day one angered the boy beyond belief. He snapped out of his quiet fuming when the man fired a question at him.

"Potter! What would I get if I added powdered root of asphodel to an infusion of wormwood?"

"Draught of Living Death, sir," Harry fired back with no hesitation. The silence in the class was palpable. Even Snape blinked. Harry remembered five years of the hateful man's potion classes, a much better year with Slughorn, and he'd even gone through his books again in the last week of August, just for this moment.

"Where would I find a bezoar?" the man snapped. He also stepped up his Legilimency, battering at Harry's shields.

"Inside the stomach of a goat," Harry replied evenly. He tried not to cringe at the memory of Ron almost dying from the poisoned mead.

"What is the difference between monkshood and wolfsbane?"

"Nothing sir, they are the same plant. Muggle botanists call it aconite."

"What is the most popular use of armadillo bile?"

"That would be the Wit-Sharpening potion," Harry replied frowning. That was a potion on the fourth year syllabus.

"Frozen ashwinder eggs?"

"Er, love potions, professor."

"Powdered moonstone and syrup of hellebore, Potter. What potion uses both ingredients?"

“That would be the Draught of Peace, sir.” He wouldn’t forget botching that one in his fifth year, not any time soon. Snape was trying to trip him up with much more advanced material than Harry could possibly know. The fact that the boy still knew the answers must be driving the man mad. Harry knew he was being a little indiscreet, but he couldn’t help himself.

“Pomegranate juice?”

“Strengthening solution, sir.”

“When must fluxweed be gathered to be useful for potion making?”

“During the full moon, sir,” Harry replied. Snape’s face was darkening and the class had gone utterly silent, save for the scratch-scratch of Hermione’s quill as she quickly scribbled notes.

“What are the uses of ginger root, Mr. Potter?”

“I believe it’s also used in the Wit-Sharpening potion. Oh, and it’s good in Chinese stir-fry.” That got a quiet cough from Dean Thomas, who Harry remembered was Muggle-born.

That got a furious glare from Professor Snape, who continued to fire questions at Harry for more than fifteen minutes. Harry had a steadily worsening tension headache, but managed to answer each question in turn. Finally, the professor appeared to have grown tired of his game.

“What are jobberknoll feathers used for?”

“I believe that would be memory potions, sir.”

“Like the one you took before this class, Potter?” the professor snapped. “How else do you explain your encyclopaedic knowledge of potion ingredients? Decided to show off in front of your peers? Grab a little limelight?”

“Not at all,” Harry responded coolly. “I just read a bit ahead after I got my books.” He paused for a moment. “It’s not like this is really hard, is

it? You just get the ingredients together and follow the instructions.” He shrugged. “Just like cooking, isn’t it?” he asked innocently.

Harry had to hold himself rigid to keep from wincing, both at the look on Snape’s face and the sudden furious thrust of the man’s Legilimency. Harry’s barriers still held, which no doubt infuriated the man even more.

“Of all the insufferable-” Snape exploded. “Damn Potters! Out! All of you! And one hundred points from Gryffindor for your bloody cheek, Potter!”

Nobody questioned this; the students just grabbed their bags and ran, most of the Slytherins as well. When they got back to the Gryffindor common room, most of the first years were pale with shock. Their class had lost a hundred points during the first week, and they did not want to face the older students when word got out.

Harry was gratified that no one directly blamed him for that fiasco, but he was furious at Snape all over again. He angrily pitched his bag into one of the squashy chairs and began to pace, hands clasped behind his back and cursing like a sailor under his breath. He jerked and spun around when someone touched him on the shoulder.

Hermione flinched back. Behind her, Ron and Neville watched him apprehensively.

Harry took a deep breath and blew it out. “Sorry,” he said.

The bushy-haired girl waved that off. “How did you know all those things?” she asked impatiently.

Harry blinked. Trust Hermione to be more concerned with this, rather than the house points. “Well, after I bought my books, I was stuck at home with the Muggles and had nothing to do, so I read a lot. Potions was the easiest thing to study, since I wouldn’t be tempted to do underage magic.”

She brightened at that. “So you spent your summer studying?”



"A good bit of it, yes. Not like I had much choice, but I wanted to make a good start. Look where that got me..."

"Don't worry about it," Ron said. "Fred and George told me that Snape hates all the Gryffindors. He takes points from them all the time for no good reason. All my brothers hate the greasy git," he continued, looking thoughtful "except maybe Percy. He gets along with *all* the professors."

"I doubt any of your brothers lost a hundred house points in one go," Harry said dubiously.

"Maybe not," Ron agreed. "But I think you just gave Fred and George a new goal."

Hermione made an exasperated sound while Harry shook his head. He sank down on one of the couches and held his aching head. Just sitting there letting Snape pound on his mind without retaliating was more exhausting than he thought it would be. He looked up when Neville sat down next to him.

"Harry," the boy said, a little hesitantly, "are you all right?"

"I'm fine, Nev," he replied, and cursed himself for slipping and using his friend's nickname, one that wouldn't be coined for several years yet.

Neville looked at him a little funny, but then got a very determined expression on his face. Harry felt his stomach flip over when he saw the boy set his jaw and frown, seeing the ghost of the friend who stood beside him in the Department of Mysteries.

"Harry, he had no business docking you points for answering his questions, let alone taking so many. I've heard so many stories about the potions teacher at Hogwarts that I was a little afraid about taking his class. Now I see he's just nothing more than a childish bully. As far as I'm concerned he can dock all the points he wants, it doesn't stop him from being a sorry excuse for a wizard," Neville declared.

"Neville!" Hermione exclaimed.

“You were there, Hermione,” Ron said.

“Yes, well,” Hermione dithered, “but you still shouldn’t talk about a professor that way.”

“That is correct, Miss Granger,” Professor McGonagall said as she entered the common room. “Now would someone like to explain why Professor Snape just entered the staff lounge on the brink of an apoplectic fit?”

Harry honestly expected everyone to point McGonagall his way and groaned silently. His head was pounding like it wanted to burst. Instead, Ron, Neville, and even Hermione moved toward their head of house, all talking over each other and denouncing Snape’s behaviour. Harry felt a warm glow in the pit of his stomach as his friends rushed to his defence.

“Students, please! One at a time,” Professor McGonagall finally said. The three of them looked at each other and Hermione spoke up again, giving a quick summary of how Snape threw them all out of his classroom and docked Harry one hundred points. “Is this true, Mr. Potter?” the stern professor asked when she was done.

He nodded slowly, still rubbing at his temples. “And something is giving me an awful headache, worse than I can recall ever having.”

Harry didn’t miss the flash of concern in his head of house’s eyes. “The headmaster requests your presence in his office. If your headache persists, I will accompany you to the infirmary for a pain-relieving potion.”

Harry sighed and followed her through the portrait hole.

When they arrived at the headmaster’s office, Snape was already waiting with Dumbledore. As he and McGonagall sat down, Harry could feel mental fingers probing at his shields. The ‘touch’ was much softer than Snape’s battering ram approach to Legilimency, and Harry guessed it was probably Professor Dumbledore’s curiosity getting the better of him. He winced, clapping his hands to the sides of his head and the fingers immediately vanished. Harry looked around blearily.

“Er, sorry,” he muttered, “I have a really bad headache.” He didn’t miss the glance the headmaster shot at the potions teacher.

“That’s all right, Harry,” the old man said in a soothing voice. “Did that perhaps contribute to the disruption that occurred during Professor Snape’s class this morning?”

“No sir,” Harry said firmly, ignoring the easy way out the headmaster had offered him. “My headache didn’t start until part way through the lesson, when, er, Professor Snape started in on me.” He ignored the venomous glare the potions master shot at him. Instead, Harry stared into Dumbledore’s twinkling blue eyes and wished he could tell his former mentor everything. He felt a feather-light touch on his shields and twitched in his chair, blinking.

“Headmaster, the behaviour of this spoiled Potter brat is outrageous! He should never-“

“Severus,” Dumbledore said softly. “Harry, would you care to explain what happened during the class?”

“Yes, sir, I’d like to do that. Do you have one of those Pensieve things? I heard two of the older students talking about how they use them to take testimony for wizarding courts.”

“I believe I can lay my hands on one, but wouldn’t it be simpler to just tell us what happened?”

Harry nodded. “I suppose so, but I thought it would save time. You see, I plan on filing a formal complaint with the Hogwarts Board of Governors, so-“

Harry did not get to complete his sentence. He felt the battering ram again, coming from Snape’s direction, slamming furiously into his Occlumency shields. Harry stiffened, arching his back. He reinforced his shields to full opacity as he slumped back in his chair, eyes rolled up in his head, apparently unconscious.

“Severus!” Dumbledore barked. Harry, relying on hearing alone now, had to stop himself from jumping. He’d never heard Albus speak so sharply before.

"This brat is hiding something from us, headmaster, and I intend to find out exactly what it is!"

"Albus, this is outrageous," Minerva exclaimed. "I will not have one of my students attacked by a professor! What did you do to him Severus?"

Harry was surprised to hear Minerva defend him so vehemently after only knowing him for a week.

"Minerva," Dumbledore's voice took on a soothing tone. "What just happened was not Severus' intent."

"Then what, pray tell, just happened?"

"Mr. Potter, it appears, is a natural Occlumens. Although untrained, he instinctively shields his thoughts and memories. It is a very rare talent, though perhaps it is a consequence of what happened to him that night. He apparently reacted to our colleague using his Legilimency in a very unfortunate manner."

"Using his Legilimency?" Minerva hissed. "Severus Snape, you've been invading the minds of students? Of *MY* students?" Professor McGonagall's voice rose into a shriek that raised the hairs on the back of Harry's neck.

He almost felt sorry for Snivellus. Almost.

"There is another possibility, headmaster," Snape said coldly, ignoring the other professor. "The Dark Lord was a skilled Occlumens as well as Legilimens. It is... conceivable... that he took refuge within Potter's body when the curse rebounded back. That would explain the boy having shields neither one of us could penetrate."

"I don't think Tom Riddle would be content to live quietly in a Muggle household for the past ten years, Severus," Dumbledore stated calmly. "I also highly doubt he would consent to being sorted into Gryffindor."

Harry had to suppress the urge to laugh and give himself away.

"If it will make you feel better though..." Harry heard sounds of movement. "Old friend, were you able to see into the boy's mind when you sorted him?" Dumbledore asked the Sorting Hat.

"Oh yes," the Sorting Hat replied in a smug voice.

Harry's blood ran cold.

"Occlumency, or any other kind of mental barrier, means nothing to me once someone willingly places me upon their head."

"Excellent! That is as I thought it would be," Dumbledore sounded pleased. "And I take it there were no invading mental presences?" he asked.

"Oh no, no invaders at all. Nothing between his ears but Harry James Potter."

Harry was pretty sure he hadn't imagined the smug undertone in the Sorting Hat's answer.

*I definitely need to find a way to extract the Horcrux without destroying the hat. If they thought I might be Voldemort in disguise, there would be no way I would be allowed to go free until after they'd gone through my memories with a fine toothed comb. I owe it a big one.*

"Now, if you two are quite finished with accusing *my student* of being a Dark Lord, I'd like to know what happened in that class that gave Severus the right to deduct one hundred house points."

Harry never knew his head of house had such a sarcastic sense of humour, but he loved her for it. He let out a low groan and tried to sit up.

"Harry," Dumbledore said in a concerned voice. "It might be best if you went and visited Madam Pomfrey. You clearly aren't feeling well, and we can always continue this discussion later."

Harry allowed himself to be hustled out of the Headmaster's office. Snape's eyes still bored into him, but he kept his Legilimency in

check. Harry decided to let the issue of the formal complaint to drop for right now. McGonagall's unexpected vehemence in his defence made him want to alter his approach. She slowed her usual brisk pace to match Harry's.

The second floor main corridor was deserted, as most of the students were still in their classes. Harry cleared his throat. "Professor McGonagall?"

She looked over at him, her lips still pressed into a thin line. "Yes, Mr. Potter?"

"Thanks for going with me, er, up there. It was good to have someone on my side."

She looked down at him, a little curiously. "Staff members do not take sides, Mr. Potter. You are my responsibility as a member of Gryffindor."

Harry nodded thoughtfully. "Professor Snape knew my father, didn't he?"

Professor McGonagall stopped dead in her tracks and stared at him. "How did you know that, Mr. Potter?"

"Well, when Professor Snape was screaming at me, he said 'Damn Potters', and I don't have any brothers and sisters, so that would almost have to mean my dad, right?"

"That's very observant of you," she said quietly. "I suppose since he brought it up himself, it's his own fault. Yes, he knew your father. They both attended Hogwarts in the same year, but they did not get along well at all. It isn't very appropriate, but I suppose some animosity has carried forward because of that. You would do well to rise above it as best you can."

"I suppose I should," Harry said thoughtfully. "I don't think you are overly fond of Professor Snape either, are you?"

"Mr. Potter, my personal likes and dislikes are none of your business. Now, we should be getting you to the infirmary."

“I’m sorry, professor, but I just wanted to ask your advice on a decision I need to make.”

She looked at Harry curiously, but did not speak.

“Professor Dumbledore obviously doesn’t want me to present a complaint to the Board of Governors. I think an account of what happened this morning would raise some serious questions about whether that man should be allowed in a classroom. The question is will it create more problems than it solves if I get him sacked?”

McGonagall’s face broke into a concerned frown. “What, exactly, in your own words, did he do?”

Harry sighed. “Well, after a smart remark about me being famous, he started firing questions at me, asking about all kinds of potions ingredients. Every question I answered just made him angrier. Finally after a while he blew up and accused me of using a memory potion. When I explained that I’d read ahead during the summer, and it was a lot like my aunt’s cookbooks, he just exploded again. He screamed at me, ordered everyone out of the potions laboratory, and docked Gryffindor one hundred points.”

The transfiguration teacher couldn’t hide the appalled expression on her face.

Harry shook his head. “The man is a professional educator, and yet he lost it – completely lost it – in front of a room full of eleven year olds. That doesn’t sound right to me.”

Minerva sighed. “No, I suppose it doesn’t. Mr. Potter. Harry. I don’t agree with what he did, but I’m not sure he can be easily replaced. There are not many Potions masters who are willing to teach younger students who are not apprenticed directly to them. Professor Snape does have a lot to teach, at least to those who can deal with his... personal issues. It would cause a major disruption for many students, some of whom are preparing to take their OWL and NEWT examinations, if he was to be fired at the beginning of the term and no immediate replacement was available.”

Harry frowned. "I don't want to hurt other students. I'm just worried about how much damage a man like that can do if he's left where he is."

"If you wish, I can make some inquiries and see if there is someone available to replace him."

"I'd appreciate that professor," Harry said, cracking his first genuine smile of the morning.

"Good. Now let's get you to the infirmary so you can join your classmates in time for lunch."

Harry thought back to his career counselling appointment in his fifth year, when Professor McGonagall backed him to the hilt against Umbridge. Although from the beginning she'd presented this stiff, formal image, he realized now that she really *had* been on his side all along.

He just hadn't figured it out.

A/N

Wow, I'm pretty bowled over by the response this story has gotten. I'd like to thank the people who took the time to send me a review – you folks are definitely motivating me to update as quickly as I can. )

I also want to thank Runsamok for helping me proofread and for providing a resilient surface to bounce ideas off of.

Now, on to questions:

Yes, Harry is trying to be more proactive in dealing with Snape. But there are issues and complications that can arise (as you can see above).

Harry is still trying to figure out what to do about Pettigrew. For now, he's biding his time.

I'm attempting to avoid some of the more common non-canon clichés that exist in HP fanfiction. Some of them are interesting, but it's hard



to throw a rock without hitting a “Harry is a Phoenix Animagus” story. I’m going to try and keep this as original as possible – or at least not use things I’ve seen done to death unless I can come up with a new angle.

Harry is very leery about letting anyone know about the future. The Sorting Hat almost gave him a heart attack. Harry’s also been alone for a long time, and the people he trusted before that could be counted on one set of fingers.

I don’t think Neville’s gran is quite as bad as the Dursleys. From what I understand, she’s a typical Lancashire matriarch, proud and determined, but not abusive or hateful. Still the generation gap between him and his relatives had to have been daunting – hopefully making supportive friends his own age will bolster his confidence a bit.

Yes, I will continue this story. I’m not going to quit writing (though Blackwand Chronicles is on temporary hiatus while I work on this – it’s coming along a bit faster and from the volume of responses, people seem to get into this one a lot more. I guess people are as big a sucker for Harry/Ginny as I am. )

Ginny is 10 years old right now. Give her some time.

Yes, merged Harry is going to be a lot more thoughtful and deliberate. Impetuous Harry wouldn’t have survived the war with Tom, or been able to keep himself under control in the past. Screwing up and getting the love of your life killed will do wonders for making you plan your actions and start thinking things through. (Yeah, he’s been blaming himself for the last thirteen years, more on this later.)

Okay, that’s all for now. If you send me a complication or neat idea that isn’t already in my outline, I’ll try to work your name into the story, or at least an acknowledgement in the notes!

## Chapter 4

....and then Ron and Neville went with me to visit Hagrid after lunch. He's quite possibly the largest man I have ever seen, but he's really a good bloke. I've only ever seen him get mad once, and that was at my uncle who was being really awful at the time. He's the groundskeeper here at Hogwarts and he really loves animals. He took a look at Trevor, Neville's toad and said the reason that Trevor was always getting lost is that he was hungry. Seems like the dried food pellets they sold Nev at Magical Menagerie don't have everything a toad needs, so he was always scampering off looking for a bug or two. Hagrid gave him a little bottle of fish oil and said a drop or two in Trevor's food each day should make a difference.

Professor McGonagall told me yesterday evening that it might take a couple of days to hear back from everyone she's contacted, so I'm going to hold off on doing something about Snape. I'm not going to call him 'professor' Snape here, since he refuses to act like one... so make sure you don't show this part of the letter to your mum!

Anyway, if someone can be found to do his job, I'll file the complaint. From what I've read in *Hogwarts: A History*, it's likely to start quite a row... but hopefully you won't have to deal with him when you start next year. On the other hand, I discovered that Professor McGonagall is actually pretty nice, once you get past the gruff exterior she hides behind. She was pretty horrified by some things Snape had done, and really lit into him and the headmaster. She doesn't play favorites, but it's good to know you can trust her. There are not many people I can really say that about. I'm kind of glad I met you and your family before anyone at Kings Cross knew who I was. At least I know you were nice to 'plain old Harry', rather than that "The Boy Who Lived" rubbish. Just kidding!

Now, my wizarding life question for the week deals with laundry; how do magical people get their clothes clean? At Hogwarts, we just leave our grubbies in the hamper, and clean clothes appear, all neatly folded, on our beds when we get back from lunch. I don't know if it's a spell or what. Fred (or maybe George) said something about 'House Elves', but I don't know if they were putting me on or not. I know there's such a thing as a cleaning charm, but do those work on

clothes? Or are they just for dirty surfaces, like a cutting board? I know at the Dursleys, I had to be careful because some fabrics couldn't go into the washing machine. (Aunt Petunia really let me have it when I ruined one of her blouses, even though it was an accident.) Do you have similar restrictions with the spells or charms you use? Or does one method work for everything?

Anyway, I better cut this off before the letter gets too heavy for Hedwig to carry. I told her to wait for your reply, and I figure you won't miss a few mice. It's not like I'll be suddenly seized by a mad desire to write to the Dursleys!

Hope to hear from you soon!

Your Friend,

Harry

PS – Hedwig loves it when you scratch the top and sides of her head.

Harry carefully folded the bundle of parchment into thirds, and then tied it with a bit of string and addressed it. He told Ron and Neville that he'd meet them for dinner and headed up to the owlery. Ron eyed the letter in Harry's hand while they talked, but didn't say anything about it.

The packet was surprisingly thick. He hadn't been sleeping well and nightmares woke him up after three or four hours each night. He stayed after charms earlier in the week and asked professor Flitwick to show him a silencing charm. He said he wasn't used to sleeping in a room with four other boys and let the tiny man assume it was a snoring issue. At least after that Harry didn't wake everyone up in the middle of the night, and no one would ask how he knew the spell.

After one of his nightmares, there also wasn't much he could do to get back to sleep. It was useless to pretend they were just dreams – most of them were drawn directly from his memories of the future. So he'd sit in the common room during the wee hours of the morning and add to the letter. It had a calming effect that was somewhat surprising, almost as if he was sitting with Ginny and talking directly to her. That worried him in a different way.

Harry hoped the letter was received well. He tried to be friendly, but not overly familiar, and encouraging without sounding like he was sucking up. Hopefully, telling her all about Hogwarts would dull her disappointment at being left behind this year, as well as lessen her anxieties when she started next year. Harry knew all too well how intimidating the castle's strangeness could be. The housekeeping questions also gave him a pretext to keep writing to her through the year. There were so many things he wanted to say to her, things he had to hold back, lest he frighten her.

He was so lost in his thoughts he didn't hear the quiet steps behind him until the last minute. He spun as he heard a voice cry out "*Accio parchment!*"

Harry clutched the letter tightly in his hand as the spell tried to pry his fingers apart. He snarled as he saw Draco Malfoy, flanked by Crabbe and Goyle. Harry's eyes narrowed as the spell ran out of power and his hand relaxed. His wand appeared in the other hand as if by magic.

"I know you thought you were so smart this morning, Potter!" the blond Slytherin sneered, "Always having to play it up for the crowd, aren't you?"

"No Draco," Harry said wearily. "Snape asked me some questions, and I simply answered them." He paused. "It's not my fault if you didn't know all the answers."

"What's that?" Draco asked, nodded at the letter in Harry's hand. "You haven't got any family. Not any real family anyway. So who are you writing to?"

"A *friend*, Draco. I know that's a foreign concept. It's someone who likes me regardless of whether I have money, or what my last name is. Now stop bothering me unless you want to be hexed into next week!"

Draco looked sideways at Crabbe and Goyle, and then raised his wand. "*Stupefy!*" they all cried at once.

"*Protego!*" Harry cast the shield charm without thinking. The poorly aimed stunning spells cast by Crabbe and Goyle ricocheted into the

walls on either side of Harry. Draco's aim was much better, to his misfortune. The red ray of light hit the glimmering shield dead center and rebounded to strike him directly in the chest.

"Potter!" Snape's voice roared from behind Harry while Draco was still crumpling to the ground.

Harry spun toward the professor, but kept his wand by his side. Actually pointing it at the man would only provoke him to some worse violence. "Yes, professor?" he asked coolly.

"Duelling in the corridors is expressly forbidden, Potter. I'll have you expelled for this."

"I think not, professor. A check of my wand will show the only spell I've cast was a shielding charm. Your star pupil over there cast the first spell, and managed to stun himself." Harry met Snape's eyes without blinking, waiting for the man to start up again. Surprisingly, there was no attack.

"Very well," Snape growled. "I'll see if your story is validated after Mr. Malfoy wakes up. Crabbe, Goyle, take Draco to the infirmary."

After they left, Harry's heart was still pounding. He ran all the way to the owlery, and tied the slightly crumpled letter to Hedwig's leg with shaky fingers. "Wait for Ginny's response, girl," he whispered to his familiar. As he watched her fly off into the deepening twilight, Harry's heart began to lift. Malfoy getting hold of that letter would have been an utter disaster. He took some steadying breaths and tried to get his emotions back under control. He'd come within a split-second of hexing Snape, and that would have sent events spiraling out of control. For some reason the man's inability to go rummaging around in Harry's mind seemed to drive him half mad. *Why was that so important to him? I know he worked as a spy, is he suspicious of anyone he can't read inside and out? Was he... was he wanting to do something besides just see what was in there?*

Harry's blood ran cold. He'd read that a highly skilled legilimens could implant suggestions or compulsions. He'd experienced that first-hand with the visions of Sirius being tortured in the Department of Mysteries. *What all did he do to me in my original first year?*

Hermione chided him about his 'saving people thing' during fifth year. Ron got after him about being moody and depressed all the time, though he'd had good reason after learning about the prophecy. Ginny berated him for always trying to protect her, and pushing people away to 'keep them safe'. How much of that was really him? How much of it rubbed off from living with the Dursleys? How much was left that couldn't be accounted for? Was the rest the result of Snape-planted compulsions?

Harry noticed loose feathers and litter swirling around him. He could smell ozone, like the air right after lightning had struck nearby. He closed his eyes and forced his emotions back down. He hadn't done accidental magic in years, according to his personal timeline, but the surge he'd felt was unmistakable. His rage and horror had almost run away with him, and Harry knew he couldn't afford to lose control.

He was still numb as he made his way down toward the Great Hall. An even better question than **what** was **why**? Voldemort wasn't even really alive during Harry's first year, so *why* was Snape trying to do things to him now? He wasn't even actively spying on the Dark Lord until after the Tri-Wizard Tournament. Then Harry remembered something he'd read in a detective story: 'Always look for the simplest explanation first.' Severus Snape was a mean, vindictive man. Tormenting the son of James Potter would be as natural for him as breathing. Implanting subtle suggestions to do the same thing while he wasn't there would be the next logical step.

He concluded that he might never know how much the changes in his former life might be due his own growing up, and how much might be from implanted suggestions and compulsions wearing off. He would not let himself think about how his decision to leave Ginny at Hogwarts for her own protection might have been influenced. That way lay the path to madness – or to murder.

Harry ignored the buzz of conversation in the Great Hall, emanating from those who came down early for dinner. He walked through the corridor that ran to the staff quarters and sighed when he saw Professor McGonagall. Her eyes narrowed when she saw him.

“Professor, could I speak with you for a moment,” Harry asked, a little breathlessly.

She opened one of the classroom doors next to him and motioned him to step inside. “Is something the matter, Mr. Potter?” she asked once the door was shut.

“Yes, professor. I was attacked on the way to the owlery.”

“You appear to be unharmed, Mr. Potter. Who did it?”

“Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle. Professor Snape stepped in after their first volley though, and told me I was to be expelled.”

McGonagall inhaled with an angry noise. “Well, there is a prohibition in the school regulations, though it’s seldom enforced to such a degree.”

Harry scowled. “Draco was only hit with his own stunner, but Professor Snape had him brought to the infirmary instead of reviving him immediately. I believe he did that so they could work out a story to tell. From what I’ve read there is a spell that will show the last spells cast by a wand. Would you mind terribly casting it on my wand so you can be a witness that the only thing I did was cast a shield charm?”

She looked at him a little oddly, but nodded. “Very well, hand me your wand, Mr. Potter.”

Harry did so, though he now felt a little exposed without it.

“*Priori Incantato!*” she said as she tapped his wand with her own. An ethereal looking shield emerged from the tip, followed by a transfiguration spell she recognized from yesterday’s homework assignment. “That confirms your story, though I feel I should congratulate you. That’s fairly advanced defensive magic for someone of your age.” She smiled a little as she handed him his wand back.

Harry shrugged like he was embarrassed as he scrambled for a way to explain. “Well, I didn’t have much to do over the summer. My Uncle

wouldn't let me out of my room for weeks at a time. Fortunately, I was able to send my owl to Flourish and Blotts with orders for books and have them charge it to my vault. At least my time wasn't completely wasted," he concluded.

McGonagall stared at him for a moment, and Harry felt guilty for the lie... though it would have been true if the merger with his older self hadn't happened... and his Aunt and Uncle had locked him in the cupboard under stairs for weeks at a time before he received his Hogwarts letter. Accidental magic was never seen as such. "Very well, Mr. Potter," she said, "Five points to Gryffindor for your restrained response and foresight in coming to me with this. You should go now, before you are late for dinner."

Harry's hands were still shaking by the time he sat down with his friends.

That weekend, Harry pretty much confined himself to the Gryffindor Tower when not eating in the Great Hall. He got a good bit ahead in his homework and even farther ahead in his reading. Hermione was ecstatic to have a study partner who seemed as willing to work as hard as she was. Ron and Neville also spent a good part of the weekend with them, getting caught up on all their classes.

Harry's studious urges, however, evaporated Sunday morning when Hedwig landed in front of him with a letter attached to her leg. Harry fed her a sausage while he carefully untied the message. Ron looked at Harry a little curiously, but didn't say anything. Harry just tucked the parchment into his robes and went back to eating his breakfast while Hedwig took off for the owlery.

Harry managed to work on his transfiguration essay with Hermione until lunch. By that point, he couldn't think of anything except for the letter resting in his pocket. After lunch he retired to his dormitory for a bit of a lay-down. He unfolded the parchment and began reading.

*Dear Harry,*

*I was surprised when I got your owl Friday night, but not as surprised as Mum! She thought the letter was for her, and Hedwig snapped at her when she tried to take it off her leg. By the way, she is the most*



*gorgeous owl I have ever seen, and smart too. She wouldn't eat any of the snacks the twins left behind. That's a good thing too!*

*I really liked your description of Hogwarts and your classes. Ron promised he'd write me, but he hasn't yet, the prat. I can't believe how mean the potions teacher was. You ought to hex him good! I can teach you one that I use on my brothers. It's called the bat-bogey hex and it's really, really gross what it does to people. That's why I like it. Even Fred and George were impressed the first time I used it on them. (They dyed my hair blue as a prank, only it didn't wash out for a week! Mum was furious!)*

*I'm afraid my letter won't be as thick as yours, on account of there not being much going on here. Mum is a little sad with no boys in the house now. She likes spending time with me, but all she wants to do is bake things. I like biscuits as much as the next person, but if I don't watch it you'll have to roll me onto the Hogwarts Express.*

*I take that back. She did try to teach me how to knit, but that was an utter disaster. I also found out that degnoming the garden without any brothers takes forever. At least now I know Ron is good for something after all. (Please tell him I said that, maybe he'll remember he's supposed to write me!) Walking to the village for groceries is okay, as long as it isn't too warm.*

*Before I forget, I asked Mum about cleaning charms and she wanted to know why. When I told her you'd written to me asking about that she got the oddest look on her face. None of my brothers will do any washing up unless she's holding a wand on them, so she thought it was a little odd. When I explained you were raised by muggles she understood though – I hope you don't mind. Anyway, she said there's one charm she uses for laundry and another for cleaning...*

Harry smiled as his eyes traced down the page. Her letter was written almost as a stream on consciousness. It reminded him a little of how she'd sit with him after Sirius and Albus died and he was brooding. She didn't ask him how he was feeling, or get confrontational at all. She'd just sit close to him, holding his hand later on, and chatter on about nothing at all. Her voice would distract him from his problem; even as her closeness silently reassured him he was not alone.

He wasn't even aware when he dropped off into a dreamless sleep, the first one he'd had since returning to Hogwarts. He didn't awaken until early Monday morning.

Harry was particularly careful when classes resumed on Monday. The situation with Snape and Malfoy was deteriorating far faster than he remembered from before. He'd hoped the incident on the train would have encouraged the Slytherin to reconsider his path. Instead, being beaten so decisively must have infuriated the pureblood. Snape's repeated failures to violate Harry's mind seemed to have also set the professor on the warpath.

At least nothing came of Snape's threats after Draco was stunned. Harry was fairly certain he had his head of house to thank for that.

Ron had been pestering Harry on an almost daily basis to show him some muggle fighting tricks. That afternoon they only had a single class, so Harry led Ron out to an open field near the Quidditch pitch. Neville tagged along as well. Harry demonstrated a couple of holds and they did a few exercises before both of his friends were red-faced and puffing. Harry frowned at them thoughtfully.

"All right, that's enough," he said.

"But we just got started," Ron protested. Neville was too winded to speak.

"Yeah, and you're all but falling down, Weasley."

Ron's face turned a little redder, but he didn't argue, which Harry felt was a minor miracle. "We need to set our alarms for an hour earlier tomorrow," he said firmly.

"Blimey, why would we want to do that?"

"Because we are coming down here every morning and running around the pitch a few times. You need to get in shape if you want to learn this stuff. Or do you like Goyle using you as a punching bag?" Truth be told, Harry knew he could use the exercise as well. He was skinnier than Ron, but not that much better in physical condition.

"I suppose not," Ron admitted dejectedly.

"Besides, you're always talking about playing Quidditch. I'll bet your play improves if you get into shape. You'll be able to move faster, anyway."

That did it. Ron straightened up and looked Harry in the eye. "Do you think an hour early is enough?" he asked fiercely.

Neville just shook his head as he tried to get his wind back.

Hermione, however, did not think it was such a good idea... and she let them know all about it when Ron mentioned it at dinner.

"Harry, I don't think you should be teaching these boys how to fight."

"Crikey Hermione, have you seen the size of those junior trolls that hang out with Malfoy?" Ron sputtered.

"That's just it, Ron. You shouldn't be fighting him at all."

"But he's always messing with us!" the red-headed boy protested.

Harry sighed. After the disastrous first potions class, it was a minor miracle if any Gryffindor got a completed potion turned in for grading. If Draco and his cronies weren't tossing things in to disrupt the brewing, then Snape was banishing the contents of their cauldrons because they supposedly hadn't done something right. Harry just ignored the steady stream of zero scores he received and concentrated on taking good notes for their eventual O.W.L. revision. Those mattered a lot more than whatever grade the professor did or didn't assign.

"You should go to a professor when there's a problem, Ronald!" Hermione insisted. Harry winced. She only used full names when she was getting really wound up.

"Hermione," Harry asked quietly. "What if the professor *is* the problem?"

She didn't really have a good answer for that and just huffed.

Tuesday morning, Harry was up before the alarm clock. His nightmares weren't completely back, but his sleep was troubled. He put on a baggy t-shirt and gym shorts that Dudley had out-grown. They looked fairly ridiculous on his skinny frame, but they were all Harry had. He woke Ron and Neville at six and they grumbled as they dug through their trunks for summer clothes they could run in.

Harry thought a minute, then took a broken shoelace and tied it around the end of his wand. He looped it around his neck and slid the wand down the neck of his shirt. He wasn't going anywhere unarmed if he could help it. The sun was just peeking over the Forbidden Forest, silhouetting the castle, when they jogged out to the pitch.

Harry led them around the perimeter of the playing field, setting the pace at around a slow jog. The American war-mages he and Ron worked with set a great store in staying physically fit. They were always doing some sort of exercises every day, as if they couldn't stand to sit still. Harry wasn't quite as fanatical, but he couldn't deny the effects it had on their fighting. They dodged - ducking, leaping, and rolling like crazed monkeys - all the while casting a steady stream of curses. They also weren't afraid to get up close to their enemies. Most of them carried a short blade of some sort, and all of them knew some variety of martial arts. The biggest initial advantage the Death-Eaters had was their use of the Unforgivable Curses and a willingness to use noncombatants as hostages and distractions. Once the Americans adapted their tactical rules, something General Hastings called the "Rules of Engagement", the Death Eaters were quickly on the run. Working with General Hastings' men had given Harry tremendous respect for their training, and he intended to recreate it as much as possible. He intended for his friends to be able to defend themselves the best way he knew how. If he had to form Dumbledore's Army all over again in this timeline, then he intended to make it an army in more than just name.

Looking back at his friends, he saw they were starting to fade. Both of them were breathing hard, but Neville's face was turning an alarming shade of purple as he struggled to catch his breath. Nonetheless, the heavier boy was doggedly following Ron's heels. Harry slowed his pace with some relief as well, and they did a final lap at a fast walk to cool down. Both boys looked discouraged as they trudged back to the

castle, but Harry told them it would get better. They just had to go a little bit farther each day.

They cleaned up and showered just in time to make it to the Great Hall for breakfast. Hermione was already sitting down when they arrived, and Harry noticed that the other first year Gryffindors had left spaces around her. *Her bossiness is still an issue with her*, Harry mused. She looked up gratefully as they arrived. Both Neville and Ron had a good bit of healthy color to their faces, even after their showers. If Hermione noticed, she didn't say anything though.

By the time Thursday rolled around with their first flying lesson, Harry was eating breakfast and still wondering what he should do. Retrieving Neville's Remembrall had brought him to Professor McGonagall's notice and gotten him the seeker spot on the Quidditch team. On the other hand, Neville had to fall off his broom and break his wrist for that to happen. Harry was leery about altering things too much this early on, but was him getting on the Quidditch team that important? He enjoyed the game immensely, even though he hadn't gotten to play since that last pick-up game at The Burrow after Bill and Fleur's wedding. Harry blinked and swallowed hard at the lump in his throat. It took half a goblet of pumpkin juice before he could eat again. Their wedding had been the last truly happy occasion in his former life, before things had all gone wrong.

Harry clenched his jaw. *To hell with fate! I'm going to do right by my friends first and foremost. If I change things too much, well, they could hardly turn out worse, could they? As long as I don't completely blow my cover, I'll change what I can, and Merlin help anyone that threatens my friends or family this time around.*

"Alright, Harry?"

Harry blinked and looked up into Ron's concerned blue eyes. "Yeah, just thinking, Ron."

His friend frowned. "Don't worry about the flying lesson," Ron said in a comforting tone. "It's a lot easier than it looks." He glanced over at Hermione who was frantically paging through *Quidditch Through the Ages*. "Bill and Charlie said that their muggle-born friends all started off really nervous, but ended up doing great."

Harry raised his eyebrows at Neville, but the round-faced boy was staring down at his plate. *Was Ron actually trying to reassure 'impossibly bossy' Hermione?* He wondered, not for the first time, how long his friend had really been in denial in the original timeline.

Neville, sunk in his own misery, hadn't picked up on that. "My gran never let me on a broom at home. Said I'd break my fool neck." Any questions Harry had about interfering on Neville's behalf were annihilated by the hopeless look on the boy's face.

"I've never been on one either," Harry admitted, "So Ron will have to show us how it's done." Neville sighed and began eating again. Ron's ears went pink at the praise, but he didn't seem to want to show off as much as Harry remembered. Maybe they'd be spared that ridiculous hang glider story this time around.

His face brightened when Hedwig swooped down with a letter attached to her leg.

That afternoon, Harry's heart couldn't help but lift as they marched out onto the grounds. He loved flying, even if it was on a creaky old school broom. He caught Ron's eye as they approached the Slytherins gathered around the broomsticks. He also had another letter from Ginny tucked into his robes, waiting to be read after supper.

"Keep an eye on Hermione," he whispered to Ron.

His friend frowned at him. It was evidently one thing for him to do something nice spontaneously, but quite another once someone suggested it to him.

Harry rolled his eyes. "She's still a Gryffindor, and we've got to take care of our own," he explained, still whispering. "Besides, I don't trust the Slytherins."

Ron's eyes narrowed and he gave a curt nod. Harry veered off and made sure he was walking right beside Neville when they arrived.

Madam Hooch's introduction went the same as he remembered, but this time when they all said "Up!", Hermione and Neville's brooms rose slowly with the rest of the class.

As they prepared to launch, Harry reached over and grabbed Neville's shoulder. "Make sure you don't kick off too hard," he said quietly. This time Neville kept it under control and only raised a couple of feet into the air. Madam Hooch had them repeat the exercise a few times until everyone was comfortable. Then she began to explain how to turn and he and Neville both pivoted smoothly.

Harry smiled at the relieved Neville, and only had time to register his look of alarm before something slammed into the back of his head, knocking him off the broom.

There was an instant of blackness and Harry realized he was on his hands and knees, staring down at the grass. He blinked and sat up, groaning.

"You all right, mate?" He looked up at Ron.

"I think so, what happened?" He saw Madam Hooch leaning over Neville, who was lying flat on the ground. Malfoy was standing over her, loudly denouncing the poor quality of the school brooms.

"Crabbe and Goyle suddenly lost control and slammed into you and Neville. They're playing it up like it was an accident," he said disgustedly and glared at Draco. "Though they somehow managed to land on top of both of you. The school brooms aren't great but they aren't that bad, it's just another filthy lie from those no-good snakes."

"Neville hasn't moved yet," Hermione said in a worried voice. "I think he's unconscious."

Madam Hooch waved Draco off with an impatient gesture. She pulled out her wand and gently lifted the unconscious Neville into the air. "Mr. Potter, are you all right?" Hooch asked. "Can you walk?" she called back over her shoulder as she slowly levitated Neville toward the castle.

"I'm fine," Harry replied.

"We'll let Poppy be the judge of that," Hooch countered. "Please follow me to the infirmary, but set your own pace. Mr. Weasley?"

Ron straightened guiltily. "Yes?" he asked, swallowing.

"Please accompany Mr. Potter to the infirmary. He took a good blow to the head. If he has any difficulties, please summon the nearest staff member. I'm taking Mr. Longbottom to the hospital wing now. The rest of you," she concluded, raising her voice, "brooms down now or you'll be out of Hogwarts before you can say 'Quidditch'!"

Harry climbed to his feet blinking. Ron helped steady him, but his legs weren't that wobbly. "I'm okay," he said quietly. "He just stunned me for a second."

As they walked back toward the castle, Harry's legs grew even steadier. He did, however, become aware of some bruises on his back and a large knot that was forming on the back of his head.

"Give that back, Malfoy!"

They both froze when they heard Hermione's voice behind them. Harry spun around, ignoring the ache that flared from the back of his skull.

Hermione was trying to get around a laughing Crabbe and Goyle, while Draco held something over his head. He looked like Christmas had come early for him.

"I don't take orders from filthy Mudbloods," the blond Slytherin sneered. "Oh, and it's addressed to Harry Potter! It must be some of his fan mail!"

Harry's blood went cold and he patted his robes. The letter from Ginny was gone. He felt his school robes billowing around him as charged back down the grassy slope. He saw Draco's eyes light up with malicious glee as he approached.



“Oh Potter, a missive from one of your adoring fans... surely you get so many, it mustn't be that important, right? Surely you can share it with the rest of us?”

“Give it here, you thieving, low-life bastard!” Harry snarled.

“I don't think so, Potter,” Draco yelled as he leapt onto his broom and shot into the air, “Why don't you make me?”

Harry grabbed his broom and shot into the air like he'd been fired out of a cannon. Oddly enough, Hermione didn't yell at him about getting into trouble this time. *Maybe she was angry about the Mudblood comment.* Harry found himself too angry to enjoy his first broomstick flight like he had last time, though he did enjoy the shocked look on Draco's face as he wheeled his broom around and fled. Harry pursued him more aggressively this time, and looped around him before Draco had gotten more than a quarter of the way around the grounds. The Slytherin pulled back as Harry swerved in front of him.

“No bodyguards up here, Draco. Are you sure you want me to make you?” Harry taunted.

Draco's face purpled and he took the crumpled up letter in his hand and hurled it downward. “Catch it if you can!” He called out as he turned and fled.

Harry dived without thinking. There was no time to pull out his wand. Draco had evidently been wadding up the parchment as he fled, because it fell like a stone... straight toward the Whomping Willow. Harry cursed and pushed the old broom for every last bit of speed it had. The animated tree would tear the letter to pieces and scatter them to the four winds. When he had time to reflect back on it, he'd question why he was so determined to save it, but for now he was only focused on his dive.

Harry veered around two thick boughs, one of which was already swinging around to block him. He swerved to avoid another branch when the balled up parchment bounced off the trunk at a point nearly thirty feet above the gnarled roots.

The tree reacted to this contact in its typical fashion. Every branch and twig whipped through the air toward the location of the disturbance. Harry barely managed to thread between the converging limbs. He leaned over and grabbed the letter less than a yard above the ground. Harry then hauled back on the broom with all his might and managed to swerve enough to miss the ground and loop back into the air, well clear of the murderous tree.

Harry smoothed out the crumpled parchment with trembling fingers as he used his knees to guide the broom back to his stunned classmates. He tucked the letter back into his robes as he landed. Harry was so stunned that he didn't even jump when Professor McGonagall shrieked his name.

He numbly watched Ron and Hermione try to placate their distraught head of house as his mind raced. He'd tried to consciously change something, but this time events occurred that... pushed... things back to the way they were before. Did this mean that fate was immutable? Was everything going to happen the same way again? It seemed like he'd made a difference already with Neville, but was he just fooling himself? Or was Neville's changed attitude not going to make a difference -- was he still going to die defending the castle in his seventh year?

He was operating pretty much on auto-pilot as McGonagall introduced him to Oliver Wood, but this time his fears were not as simple as just getting expelled. Was he fooling himself thinking anything had really changed at all? At the expense of not playing Quidditch his first year he'd consciously decided to not let Neville get hurt. Now here they were: Neville hurt even worse than last time, and Harry about to become the youngest Seeker in about a century.

Again.

Harry never imagined getting to play Quidditch would cause him to feel this much dread.

Was fate immutable?

A/N

Hello again. This update is a little shorter, but I hit a really good spot to end the chapter on a slightly spooky note (and today is Halloween after all).

Now, on to the comments!

True, Harry did come from a muggle household, but he does have access to books and could very well have read *Hogwarts: A History* before even coming to school – like Hermione did in canon. He's also laid the groundwork to cover for himself with the story he told McGonagall about learning *Protego*, the shield charm.

I'm assuming from canon that the details of Lucius Malfoy's trial are public knowledge. Enough people have made reference to them in the stories who were not there (Arthur Weasley (via Ron), talking about how Lucius claimed to be magically coerced into supporting Voldemort. Harry also implied that he'd read *Modern Magical History*, *The Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts*, and *Great Wizarding Events of the Twentieth Century*. With his early rising, constant letter writing, more mature attitude, and trunk full of books, Harry is projecting a more scholarly image than he did the first time around. Whether this will be enough to explain everything remains to be seen...

Intromit's *Harry Potter and Fate's Debt* is a story I read a while back, that I really enjoyed, and hope he updates soonest! ) *Harry Potter and the Time Mage* was also recommended by a reviewer and I read it last night... it has some interesting ideas (what is it about 30 year old Harrys, anyway?) If anyone sees any other stories like these, please let me know!

Quick updating is one of the positive consequences of being laid off. I'm working on improving my writing skills before I go back to work on my novels. )

Harry is indeed not acting like a typical eleven year old. On the other hand, who would expect that from the Boy Who Lived? He's also laying the groundwork to support his precociousness by letting people see hints about his home life with the Dursleys. Children who grow up in abusive environments are often seen as acting "old beyond their years".

I've got a pretty good idea of how Harry will deal with that damned diary of Tom's.

"Does Harry understand that even being pen pals with Ginny, by altering the past he runs the risk that they won't end up together?" Yes, he does. His anxiety about how he words things in his letters bears witness to this. On the other hand, her shyness, embarrassment, and isolation led to her horrible experiences in her first year and scarred her in many ways. If helping her become happier and better adjusted means that she no longer needs him, then so be it. **True love means wanting the other person to be as happy as possible, even if it isn't with you. Maybe it's a manifestation of his 'saving people thing', but Harry (at least my version anyway) would rather see a live Ginny happily married to, say, Michael Corner, than a Ginny who loved him forever, but died for it. That's what makes him Harry.**

Harry's not sure about his magic really... we'll have to wait and see.

Ditto with the big snake.

Harry is starting to think about convenient accidents, but what happened at the flying lesson may dampen his ardor a bit.

I have a Pettigrew-Resurrection resolution that I believe is unique.

Yes Snape is a bastard. No Severitus here, folks. Move along, move along. )

Harry may have a mental age of thirty, but he's a pretty good candidate for the arrested development poster child of the year, especially on the emotional side of the ledger. A big piece of that went into suspended animation after the Hogwarts Massacre, and he's only now dealing with it. Poor Harry!

Alas, I will bow to the will of the masses, and concentrate on this story for now, and let Blackwand Chronicles rest a bit. Don't worry though. I like my Slytherins a little too much to let that story devolve into a Greek Tragedy (as The Unicorn put it.) I'm going back to writing as soon as I post this, so next update will be in a day, maybe two.

-S'TarKan CladRan

PS – Bonus points to whoever recognizes the reference contained in the title of this story – offer void for members of the jeconais yahoo group.

## Chapter 5

Harry kept a low profile with his meddling after that. He enjoyed Oliver's enthusiasm for the game and their prospects for the new season. The congratulations from Fred and George particularly warmed his heart. He hadn't seen much of the twins lately – they were no doubt up to the eyebrows in some mischief – but that would change once they started practicing together. He concentrated on the here and now, and not on what he knew was coming.

Even with his desire to avoid tempting fate, Harry refused to rise to the bait when Malfoy tried to trick him into agreeing to a duel during dinner.

"I'd take you on anytime on my own," he declared.

"Really, Draco? Then let's suggest we have a duelling tournament to Professor Quirrell! Let's get some extra credit for it!" Harry's grin widened as he saw Malfoy's sneer falter.

*The little sneak was planning to set me up with Filch all along!*

He stood up from the table and glared at the Slytherin, ignoring his bodyguards. "Make no mistake, Malfoy. When I kick your arse I want the whole school to see it," he hissed.

Then he promptly sat back down and went back to his steak and kidney pie. He smirked at Ron, who abruptly began laughing.

"I don't see what's so funny," Hermione said crossly.

"Oh, just the look on that Malfoy's face," Ron replied. "He didn't know whether he wanted to roar or cry."

"I don't know why you and Harry keep taunting him," she warned. "Nothing good will come of this."

"Well, we couldn't let him get away with what he called you," Ron said seriously. "You're a Gryffindor, and we take care of our own."

Hermione blinked and Harry almost smirked as a slow flush crept up her cheeks. "We need to finish eating and go see Neville," she said and took a quick drink of water. Ron just grunted and continued eating.

Madam Pomfrey revived Neville fairly easily, but decided to keep the boy in the hospital wing overnight for observation. He had, after all, sustained a light concussion. They found him sitting up in his bed, just finishing his dinner as they walked in.

"You just missed my Gran," he said, smiling. "At first she thought I'd fallen from my broom or something silly like that. When she found out Crabbe rammed into me, she Flooed over and demanded he be expelled!" Neville's grin faltered a little. "Unfortunately, Madam Hooch was looking the other direction when they supposedly lost control, so it was ruled an *accident*."

"That's bloody ridiculous!" Ron all but shouted, earning him a sharp look from Madam Pomfrey at her desk.

"That's what Gran said, er, almost, anyway. But Madam Hooch is making both of them wax and re-tune all the school brooms!"

"Blimey, I'd do that for a free shot at Malfoy!" Ron protested.

"You... you're just impossible!" Hermione fumed. "I'm glad you're okay, Neville," she said, smiling at the boy, then walked out in a huff.

"What's her problem?" Ron groused.

"I don't know," Harry said thoughtfully. "Maybe she likes you?" he asked innocently.

Ron turned pink. "You're mental, you are!"

"What do you think, Nev?" Harry said, carefully winking at his friend.

"Well, I don't know," Neville said cautiously, picking at a thread on his hospital pyjamas, as Ron looked even more outraged. "Looks like true love to me," he said, absolutely deadpan. Harry blinked.

*Did he actually look a little sad when he said that?*

Then he remembered that the 'old' Neville had actually worked up the courage to ask Hermione to the Yule ball, and felt abruptly ashamed. He didn't get the chance to say anything else, though, because Ron's outraged shouting caused Madam Pomfrey to eject them from her ward. As they walked back to the Gryffindor tower, Harry smoothed the front of his robes, reassured by the crinkle of parchment that his letter was still there.

As if reading his mind, Ron looked sideways at him as they walked. "Er, that letter, the one Malfoy nicked...?"

Harry sort of expected this. "Yes?"

"It was from my sister, wasn't it?"

"Yes, it was," Harry answered. Expecting it didn't mean he was going to make it easy for Ron to cross-examine him. "You know I'm writing to her about Wizarding household magic. I've even given copies of her answers to Hermione."

"Well, I'm just asking... Well, you got really angry at Malfoy today for taking one..." his voice trailed off uncomfortably. "Just seemed kind of odd, you know."

Harry stopped next to one of the suits of armour around the corner from the portrait of the Fat Lady. "Ron, if it seems kind of odd, well. Let me put it this way. Do you know how many letters I've received in my life?"

Ron shook his head.

"Three: my Hogwarts letter and two letters from Ginny. I suppose that is a little odd, but when you've never had something before, and someone tries to take it away... well..." his voice trailed off, and Harry realized he wasn't just talking about letters.

Ron looked horribly uncomfortable, and Harry felt a stab of guilt for how he'd evaded Ron's real question. It would be easier for him to leave Ron thinking as he did now, but would it be right?



Harry took a deep breath. He'd been hoping to put this off for a while. "Ron, I'm not going to lie to you. I think Ginny is pretty special. She was nice to me and helped me at Kings Cross, before anyone noticed this ruddy scar. I think... it helps me to have someone to write to who isn't in the middle of things here. I know she misses having someone to talk to. She said you'd promised to write her, and she sounded pretty lonely stuck at home with her Mum, and missing all her brothers."

Ron's face had gone a little pale again. "I'm still working on a letter," he muttered, sounding a little guilty.

"It doesn't have to be a literary masterpiece," Harry said, a little exasperated. "She just wants to know you haven't gone off and forgotten her."

Ron nodded for a moment. He looked up at Harry again, his expression a little horrified. "You don't... *like*... her, do you?"

*I must not tell lies.* "I don't know," he stalled. It wasn't precisely a lie – *this* Ginny could turn out to be far different than the one he remembered. "Why don't we just wait and see what happens, all right?"

Ron, bless his heart, still looked a little queasy. Harry held back his laughter with great effort. "You're really being weird, Harry."

"I've never been normal, *Ronald*," Harry replied, mimicking Hermione's voice.

Ron laughed out loud, and they eased past an uncomfortable moment as they re-entered the Gryffindor common room.

Harry's determination to avoid meddling was sorely tested over the next few weeks. The first time around, he remembered being consumed with trying to figure out what Hagrid had retrieved from Gringotts. This time he knew what it was and where it was, the only question was what he should do about Professor Quirrell.

Malfoy spotted the Nimbus 2000 being delivered again, only this time Harry yanked it back out of reach when he grabbed for it. Ron and

Neville sized up Crabbe and Goyle like they really wanted to take them to pieces. Things were getting a little tense before Hermione caught Professor Flitwick's eye. Harry couldn't help but smirk at the gobsmacked look on Malfoy's face when the Charms professor confirmed that Harry was *supposed* to have the broom.

"...and it's really thanks to Malfoy here that I've got it," sounded just as sweet the second time around.

During the initial Quidditch practices, Harry had to remember that he was still supposed to be a neophyte. He sat patiently through Oliver's explanation of the game, and tried not to get too creative when catching the golf balls. He started off slowly in the team practices as well, but soon he checked *Quidditch Through the Ages* out of the library and made a big show of reading it in the common room. The first time he practiced a Wronski feint he nearly gave Oliver a heart attack, but at least he could say he'd been reading up on it.

Ginny was very excited when he wrote her about making the team. So much so, that the next letter from her was spattered with ink and her usually neat script was reduced to a hurried scrawl. Harry could almost picture her in his head, bouncing in her chair at the Weasley's scrubbed wood table, writing as quickly as she could. She also told him that Ron had finally written her, but she phrased it like she was thanking him. She evidently figured out that Harry had said something to her occasionally-thick brother. He wondered how long it would be before Ginny got as good at reading him as she was in his former life.

They were writing each other nearly twice a week now. Hedwig seemed to be enjoying the exercise. Obviously, Harry did not have to study very hard to pass his classes, something which annoyed Hermione to no end. He'd recently taken to hauling a textbook up to bed with him. He claimed he liked to read before sleeping, and instead worked on his letters there and after his dreams woke him up. New letters from Ginny still gave him a break from the nightmares, which was rather odd to him. He supposed it gave his imagination something to work on besides dredging up the most horrific scenes from the war.

He also noticed that her narratives were starting to talk more about herself and less about what was going on at The Burrow. He smiled when he read her rant about being treated like a helpless infant by her older brothers, except for Bill. When she talked about Quidditch, she mentioned having to practice flying by sneaking out after dark and pinching her brothers' brooms. This gave Harry a very warm feeling, because he knew she'd never mentioned this to her family. Ron and the twins only found this out in his fifth year, the first time around.

She was slowly becoming a friend, and hopefully not someone who wouldn't be able to speak in his presence next year. If fate tried to screw that up, he was going to have words with the bastard.

Harry was very much on edge the day of Halloween. He knew that Quirrell was going to sneak a mountain troll into the castle to cover his attempt at the Sorcerer's Stone. He was halfway tempted to track the possessed professor down and finish him off, but he couldn't come up with a sufficient pretext. The man seldom left his chambers, and always stayed away from Harry in class. His nervous, fear-stricken persona was perfect for keeping everyone at a distance – a handy thing if you have a Dark Lord sticking out the back of your head. No, the best time to take him down might actually be when he made his attempt on the stone.

Besides, Harry was fairly certain he could handle a mountain troll if he had to. A cutting or bludgeoning curse to the head should drop a troll as readily as a human. Besides, if he kept his friends together, they could just let the professors handle it as they wanted to. Unfortunately, his nervous tension was apparent to his friends as well. Neville and Ron pulled him aside after their morning run to ask him if everything was all right. Harry knew he shouldn't have been surprised, given how much of him they saw throughout the day.

Their morning runs had become a little more respectable and Harry had begun showing Neville and Ron some basic fighting stances again, taking it slow for now. As it was, the three boys spent a lot of time together, and Harry wondered if Hermione was feeling left out at times. He tried to compensate for it in other ways, though he wasn't sure how effective it was. From his psychology books, he knew she

was likely to be a little uncomfortable as the only girl in their little group. Lavender and Parvati were okay people, but they had always been a little too flighty for the kinds of trouble Harry's friends tended to get into. Next year might help the gender balance, but that would be a while off.

There were other ways to support her as well. Hermione was a born overachiever, and Harry was doing well in his classes for other reasons. When they had to pair off for class work, Harry tended to grab Neville, or 'Nev'. Harry's accidentally applied nickname had started to stick, but Longbottom didn't seem to mind. He intentionally left Ron to work with Hermione, all in accord with Harry's 'cunning plan'. While they still bickered about schoolwork, Harry was a little more supporting of Hermione's scholastic agenda, especially in areas where he could see some practical applications. He knew what they might be facing in the future, and he wanted them as ready as possible.

Unfortunately, other people had noted the formation of their little clique.

Harry insisted that they all go down to the Halloween Feast as a group. Ron and Neville looked at him a little oddly. When they'd asked him that morning why he was so on edge, Harry used the only thing he could think of.

Both boys knew of his nightmares. Even with the silencing charms, they would sometimes wake as he left the dormitory at two or three in the morning. The occasional cramming student pulling an all-nighter would see him in the common room as well. It was common knowledge in Gryffindor that Harry Potter was an insomniac who only got one or two good nights sleep per week.

So he claimed he'd had a nightmare about something awful happening during Halloween. He said it a little sheepishly, and the blush on his face wasn't entirely feigned. They'd seen through him like a pane of glass, and his excuse was lame at best; his only consolation that it was a little less unlikely than the actual truth. It was gratifying that they chose to humour him, rather than question him too closely about the dream.

In Professor Flitwick's class, when they were studying the Levitation Charm, Harry's feather shot into the air and hovered, quivering, six feet off the ground... despite their best efforts to get it back down again. Ron, who despite Hermione's coaching couldn't even get his feather off the desk, rolled his eyes at Harry. As omens go, it was less than favourable.

When they came down the stairwell into the entry hall, Harry held them back and let a pack of Slytherins who'd just ascended from the dungeons pass in front of them. He'd feel far more comfortable with them in front than behind. As they slipped behind the students heading for the Great Hall, they could hear some of them talking.

"I think it's all pretty suspicious, how they all are *a/ways* together," said Pansy Parkinson, Draco's sycophant in training.

"You think? Aren't they a little young yet?" an older Slytherin girl asked.

"Well, I hear the lower sorts start young, all the better to start squeezing out litters," Draco spat. "Besides, can you imagine someone actually wanting a filthy Mudblood like Granger around? She probably spreads her legs for all of them and then does their homework too."

The robes in front of them rippled with crude laughter as Harry's pulse began to pound in his ears. He was reaching for his wand when he heard a gasp and footsteps receding behind him. He turned and saw Hermione half-way up the stairs. All three of them followed her to the second floor, where she dove into the girl's bathroom.

They followed and knocked on the door, but she wouldn't answer. Faint sobs could be heard coming from the crack under the door.

"C'mon, Hermione, you'll miss the feast!" Ron called out.

"Hermione, it's okay. You shouldn't ever listen to people like that," Neville said.

Harry was almost frantic. History was trying to repeat itself again. "Hermione, come out or we're coming in after you!"

“You most certainly will not, Potter!”

Harry spun to see his least favourite professor stalking towards them. “She’s upset, sir,” he said, trying to stay as formal as possible to rein in his temper.

“Granger’s emotional tantrums are her own responsibility, Potter,” spat Professor Snape. “Now all three of you, return to the Great Hall! Now!”

To their credit, Ron and Neville didn’t immediately leave. They looked at Harry, which infuriated Snape even more. Harry had never felt more helpless since he’d returned to the past.

“Mr. Potter, what are you and Mr. Weasley and Mr. Longbottom doing here?” McGonagall’s voice cut through the tension in the air.

“It’s Hermione, Professor,” Ron spoke up. “She’s really upset.”

“She overheard some people,” Neville added glaring at Snape, “say some really horrid things about her.” Under different circumstances, Harry would pay good galleons to see Neville snarling at Professor Snape.

Professor McGonagall looked from her house members to her colleague and back again. She pursed her lips in annoyance. “It would be best if you left her alone and allowed her to regain her composure. If she has not rejoined us in half an hour I will come up here myself and talk to her.”

Harry opened his mouth to protest, but then shut it. There really wasn’t anything he could say, except “Thank you, Professor.”

Harry led his friends back down to the Great Hall. When they entered, Harry ignored the live bats and the intricately carved pumpkins. He did, however notice many of the Slytherins looking up at them and laughing.

*They bloody well did that on purpose, didn’t they?* he snarled to himself.

They sat down at the Gryffindor table, and his friends waited for the feast to start. Harry was waiting for something else. No sooner had the plates filled than Quirrell stumbled in. As soon as the word 'Troll' left his lips, Harry was out of his seat. Ron and Neville, perhaps primed by Harry's admission that he had a bad feeling about the day, were only half a step behind him when they hit the doors.

They distantly heard Dumbledore calling for the prefects as they pelted up the stairs. *The circumstances are a little different;* he thought desperately, *we might not have as much time as before.* Thankfully the daily running had paid off, because as they topped the stairs, a very familiar voice screamed. As they turned down the corridor, they saw the backside of a very large troll forcing his way into the girl's bathroom.

Harry had his wand out in an instant, screaming "*Reducto!*" The bludgeoning curse knocked a piece out of the doorframe, which bounced off the troll's stony hide. An angry roar echoed from within the bathroom as it backed through the narrow doorway and back into the hall.

"*Diffindo!*" Harry's cutting curse dug a groove into its shoulder as it emerged. The gigantic club in its left hand would soon be clear of the doorway. Hermione screamed again. *Either my magic is weaker than I thought or that thing is magic resistant!* Harry thought, his mind racing, trying to remember a curse he could use.

When it finally got clear and turned toward them, Harry's heart stopped. Its right hand was dragging Hermione, the great dirty fingers tangled in the hem of her robes. She scrambled on her hands and knees, trying to find something to hold onto, but the troll's strength was not to be denied.

Harry willed his arms to move, bringing his wand up again, both hands on the smooth wood. He took careful aim, and called out "*Conjunctus!*" A purple beam of light shot out of the end of his wand and struck the mountain troll directly between the eyes. The troll roared and rubbed at its eyes with its hairy left forearm. Harry sighed in relief.

*If the Conjunctivitis Curse will work on dragons, I guess it almost had to work on a troll.*

Neville was trying to disarm the troll, but his “*Expelliarmus!*” did little more than anger it. Ron was edging toward Hermione, nervously eying the blinded troll.

Harry was gathering himself for another curse when the troll let out a roar and whipped its right hand up with surprising speed and hurled Hermione at him. Harry spread his arms and tried to brace himself, but she was moving like she’d been shot out of a cannon. Harry closed his eyes and prepared for a bone-crushing impact when he realized someone was shouting.

“*Wingardium Leviosa!*” Ron finished the spell and Hermione floated to a halt a few inches in front of Harry. As she opened her eyes again, which she’d screwed shut when was being thrown, she began to rock from side to side as she drifted back toward Ron.

Harry was breathing a sigh of relief when the world suddenly tilted and the wall decided to slam into him. He heard a loud snap at the same time and his right arm went numb. He was gasping for breath, the wind knocked clean out of him, as he felt his wand slide out of his fingers.

The massive wooden club that was holding him up against the wall was suddenly withdrawn and Harry sunk to his knees. He felt ill as blood poured down his arm. He stared. A sharp point of bone was sticking through the sleeve of his robe.

“*Rictusempra!*” Neville screamed. The troll, which had been drawing back for another blind swing, stopped dead in its tracks. Its mouth hung open and it began to make a peculiar moaning sound as the tickling charm took hold and made it laugh.

Harry, on his knees, eyes fixed on the troll, felt around on the floor with the fingers of his left hand until they closed on his wand. He raised it slowly, even as the tickling charm faded, sighting in on the monstrous creature’s mouth.



Neville saw what Harry was doing and screamed "*Rictusempra!*" again, his voice going hoarse. The troll began laughing again.

"*Diffindo!*" Harry growled, and the cutting curse shot through the Troll's open mouth and blew out the back of its neck in a spray of dark blood.

Harry blinked.

Suddenly, there were a lot more people in the corridor. Harry realized Neville was crouched next to him. The boy had his robe wadded up in his hand and was pressing it firmly against Harry's upper right arm. Ron and Hermione were in front of him. Hermione's face was filthy, smeared with dirt from being dragged, and tracked with tears; he didn't think she'd ever looked quite so beautiful before. Ron stood next to her, his face pale and serious. Harry held out his left hand and realized he still had his wand in it. Wasn't he right-handed?

Ron seemed to read his mind, because he reached down and gripped Harry's forearm, helping him to his feet. That was Ron, always helping people pick themselves up again; he was such a Weasley.

That was when Harry's ears seemed to turn back on and he realized that people were shouting all around him.

"This is yet another example of complete disregard for--" the loudest voice of course belonged to his least favourite professor.

*Can't settle for just killing the headmaster in a few years, he's, got to make everyone else miserable as hell first.*

"Snivellus, shut your trap," Harry slurred.

The sudden silence was blissful. Snape limped a little as he turned toward Harry. Then those furious black eyes were boring into his, trying to tear through defences weakened by shock and pain. Harry glared back, his defences slowly eroding. Then he brought his wand up and he heard Hermione gasp.

"I'm not gonna hex him 'Mione, geez. *Protego.*" he whispered. The glowing shield appeared again and the battering stopped. He saw bits

and pieces of other peoples' memories, probably Snape's, but he was too weak and unfocused to make any sense of them. "That's better. Knew you were doing something to me."

"Severus," Professor Dumbledore said quietly, giving the Potions master a look Harry was too tired to interpret.

"You are right, headmaster. Perhaps Potter should be escorted to the infirmary while we discuss the appropriate disciplinary action," Snape drawled as he turned a gimlet eye on a furious McGonagall.

Harry felt a pulling on his right arm and realized that Neville had secured the wadded up cloth to his wound using his own belt. It was a crude, but effective pressure bandage. He let the shield drop as he smiled blearily at Neville. "Thanks, mate."

Then Harry turned toward McGonagall and Dumbledore, taking a deep breath. "Maybe you feel we should have waited for you to arrive, Professors," he said evenly. "But the fact of the matter is that the troll already had hold of 'Mione when we got here. Any later and who knows what could have happened. When it comes to my friends, I prefer not to take any chances." He could have sworn he saw a glimmer of respect in Professor McGonagall's eyes.

"Ah yes, Miss Granger," Snape said smoothly, his eyes glittering dangerously. "If you were not out of bounds, then none of this would have occurred. Your emotional outburst nearly killed yourself and three other students; do you have anything to say for yourself?"

Out of the corner of his eye, Harry could see Hermione's face go white, like it had been slapped. She shook Ron's hand off her arm and started to leave. Unfortunately, her path took her past a smirking Draco Malfoy. He whispered something to her as she passed and she stopped dead in her tracks. She spun on her heel and slapped Draco across the face. She evidently got her whole body into it because Draco's head, neck, and shoulders were all displaced by the impact and he fell to one knee.

Harry would have laughed as she marched off, but his eyes were getting heavy again. He turned and nodded thoughtfully to

McGonagall. "He really shouldn't have called her a Mudblood whore," he said in a matter-of-fact voice.

He heard a few people gasp, but couldn't tell who they were.

Another blink.

"...I don't know what those so-called adults were thinking. You were obviously in shock, a compound fracture sticking out of your *arm*, bruises all up and down the other side. Do they take you to the infirmary? No, let's hold an inquisition on the spot. Don't mind the people bleeding on the floor," Madam Pomfrey grumbled in an all too familiar way.

Harry opened his eyes. The healer was rubbing a foul-smelling liniment on his left arm – the good arm—which was also covered with bruises he'd received from smashing into the stone wall of the second floor corridor. It hurt a bit, but the warmth starting to spread there melted the pain away. She wiped off the excess and jumped when she realized her patient's eyes were open. "Oh hello, Mr. Potter. I didn't realize you were awake."

"Don't let me stop you. I happen to agree," he whispered.

The school nurse had the good grace to blush a little. "It's still not entirely professional to rant at patients. Though I do wonder what possessed you boys to take on a full grown mountain troll."

Harry caught himself before he made the mistake of shrugging. "He had hold of a friend of mine. Neville was really the clever lad. He figured out a way for me to get past that ruddy thick hide."

"Is he the one that bandaged your arm?"

Harry nodded.

"Good job, that. Not often you find someone who can think on their feet that quickly. He probably saved your arm, you know."

Harry let out a low whistle. "I didn't know it was that bad," he admitted.

"You were in an advanced state of shock when you were brought in here. I also made sure the Headmaster was made aware of that." Did the corner of Madam Pomfrey's mouth twitch, or was that his imagination? "I understand you said a few things while you were under the weather."

Harry looked confused for a moment, and then began to blush. *I didn't just call him... oh bloody hell.*

"Ah, good. Your colour is improving so the blood restoratives must be working. The break was bad, but clean, and it's already knitting. I will allow you to return to classes tomorrow, but you are to stay here for the night." The nurse's voice was back to her brisk no-nonsense tone, and Harry knew from long experience that it would be useless to argue with her. He just nodded.

"I don't think anyone took what you said too seriously, though. Professor Snape even supplied me with a sleeping draught so you can be assured of a good rest after your ordeal," She said as she brought over a vial containing a thick purplish liquid.

Harry tensed. He did not want to drink anything the man had brewed especially for him. He knew some sleeping potions had the side effect of lowering one's mental resistance, and were thus useful for Wizarding con-artists and swindlers. He wouldn't put it past Snape to slip him one to get his Occlumency barriers down. "Er, that's all right," he said quickly.

Madam Pomfrey bristled slightly. "Mr. Potter, while you are in my ward, I am the one responsible for your care."

"It's just that... well, I have nightmares. Pretty bad ones too. It's okay if I wake up, but a couple of times I wasn't able to and, well, bad things happened," Harry said quietly, hoping he could leave it at that, hoping she wouldn't press for details. He didn't like lying to the woman who'd cared for generations of Hogwarts students, including himself. 'Bad Things' could include Snape finding out the truth as well as accidental magic such as setting the beds on fire.

“Very well,” she said after a moment’s thought. “If you wish, we can discuss this at a later time. Have you had these nightmares for very long?”

Harry shrugged. “Long enough; honestly, I’ve sort of learned to live with them.”

She nodded thoughtfully. “I want you to come see me if they persist, Mr. Potter. Chronic nightmares are not a normal condition in someone your age, and excessive fatigue can affect your magic as well. On that note, I will let you get some rest.”

Harry laid his head back as the lights dimmed. His body was still a little sore as he did his Occlumency exercises, and weariness rolled over him like a warm blanket.

Harry missed his run the next morning, but made it down to the Great Hall for breakfast. He was so relieved that everyone survived that he was practically skipping down the halls. He stumbled as he entered the Great Hall, realizing that everyone was staring at him.

The faces around the Gryffindor table were particularly unhappy. His friends wouldn’t even look up at him, and the older students were quiet.

Except for the twins, of course.

“Oi! Potter! What’s next?” one twin asked jovially, making several people around him jump.

“Going for a giant next?” the other one prompted.

Harry plopped down in his seat looking thoughtful. “Nah, I think I’ll save that for next year,” he answered, deadpan.

The twins looked at each other for a moment and then began laughing. “Our ickle Harrikins is growing some fangs,” they chuckled as the mood broke.

Harry groaned. It looked like *that* particular nickname would dog him forever. Ron and Neville had at least stopped staring at their plates,

though they wouldn't meet his eyes. Hermione still had her chin tucked into her chest, looking down. He sighed. He had a pretty good idea why they were being so quiet. Best to deal with it now. "Alright, guys?"

Ron swallowed and cleared his throat. "Harry, er, we're all really sorry that you got hurt."

"Why? I'm the fool that hexed it."

"Yeah, while we stood around like--" Neville began, but Harry cut him off.

"While Ron saved me and Hermione with that levitation charm, and you sussed out how to make it open its gob so I could finish it. Oh yeah, you two didn't do *anything*. . ." Harry said as he rolled his eyes.

Hermione let out a loud sniff, but it wasn't her usual 'I'm being bossy' sniff, but more of an 'I'm about to cry' sniff. "And none of you would have been there if I hadn't been such a fool."

"Maybe," Harry allowed, "but you couldn't have known. Malfoy said some fairly offensive things and it's perfectly natural to want to get your composure back before the feast." He thought what he'd said was perfectly reasonable, but Hermione looked at him suddenly. "Besides," he added, smiling, "it was worth it all just to see you slap that arrogant prat in the face." She bristled a little, but her eyes kept boring into him. *Does she know something?*

"But you got hurt!" Ron said.

"Nothing permanent," Harry insisted. "And I'm fine today." *Why is everyone so upset?*

"Madam Pomfrey was very angry after we brought you to her. When she came back out she said, she told the headmaster you almost died," Neville said in a sick voice.

*Oh hell, they shouldn't have heard that. No wonder they're so upset.* "But I *didn't* die, Neville," Harry said firmly. "Though Madam

Pomfrey told me you did a first-rate job wrapping up my arm," he added. "I supposed you saved my life as well."

Neville nodded but he didn't look totally convinced.

Harry sighed. Looking back, the fight with the mountain troll was an event that solidified his friendship with Ron and Hermione. No one had been hurt, but they proved something, to themselves and each other. *Maybe it would be easier to try and work with fate than against it this time?*

"All right you lot," Harry snapped. It was hard not to crack a smile when they all jumped and looked up at him. "I'll admit that was an ugly scene yesterday, and we all discovered that Hogwarts isn't always as safe as we thought it might be. That's not a pleasant thought either. But I led you up those stairs knowing there was a Troll running around, and I wanted to fight it without waiting for the teachers. If anyone is at fault, it's me. And I'm not mad at myself. Well, except for that whole 'not ducking' thing." He was relieved when he saw Ron's lips twitch a little. "I'm completely fine now, so there were no lasting effects. All right?"

The boys relaxed a little more, though Hermione still looked upset.

"Actually," Harry continued thoughtfully, "It did have one long-term effect. I know you three will stand by me, and I'm not going to forget that any time soon. All three of you proved why you were sorted into Gryffindor," he said, but Hermione was still shaking her head, eyes getting red, "and that includes you Granger. You stood up to Malfoy in front of everyone, even the Professors."

"She got docked twenty points too," Neville added proudly.

"And it was worth fifty. The twins said that too when Percy started in on her," Ron added. "I just wanted to hex him," he growled. Hermione flashed him a shy smile, but Harry didn't think he noticed.

"Good," Harry said. "Now, can we all eat before any more of this touchy-feely business ruins my appetite?" They all laughed and Harry felt such a deep sense of relief that he wanted to fall backwards out

of his seat. He speared a couple of sausages off the platter while Hermione passed him the fried potatoes.

Things were looking up.

The next morning dawned very cold and blustery. When Harry led Ron and Neville down the stairs for their morning run, they'd bundled up as best they could. They stopped when they saw Hermione sitting in the common room, wearing sweatpants and a bulky sweatshirt, waiting for them.

She stood up as they approached. "You were right, what you said yesterday. Hogwarts isn't completely safe. Do you mind if I join you, or is this for boys only?" She bit her lower lip, something Harry remembered she only did when she was really nervous about something.

"Not at all," Harry replied. "We'd be happy to have you, right guys?"

Ron and Neville both nodded groggily. Harry's nightmares guaranteed he was usually up before the alarm, but they were still half-asleep.

It was quite dark as they went outside, so Harry just led them in a slow run around the grounds near the castle. Hermione was red-faced and puffing by the end, but all of them were reddened from the cold and glad to be back inside.

*It's getting too ruddy cold to do this outside. I wonder if I should accidentally stumble over the Room of Requirement. How can I make that look like an accident though?*

Harry thought about this as he waited for the shower.

After a while he sighed and pulled out his latest letter to Ginny. He'd been debating with himself about how much to tell her regarding the incident with the mountain troll. His first impulse was to minimize the whole thing, both to avoid alarming her, or worse, Mrs. Weasley. On the other hand, there were so many things he couldn't tell her that he wondered if he was destroying any chance he might have with her. *I have to be as honest as I can be*, he thought miserably, *or she'll*



*never forgive me when she does find out. Is it fair to ask her to trust me if I don't do the same for her?* He sighed again. When the voice of his conscience put it like that, he didn't really have any choice.

...Ginny, something kind of scary happened on Halloween, and I don't mean Ron's snores waking everyone up. I'll tell you what happened, but I want you to be careful what you say to your Mum, especially until Ron has a chance to owl her. Everyone is okay, but we just had a close call. It all started as we were heading down to the Great Hall for the Halloween Feast...

After Harry reassured him that his arm was one hundred percent recovered, Oliver really stepped up the practice schedule. This time around, Harry was too happy to be playing again to complain about the pace. Truth be told, he even missed his captain's fanatical rants about his beloved game. Being the captain his sixth year and feeling that load of responsibility also gave him a lot more sympathy for the fifth-year boy.

*Maybe he won't have to wait for his seventh year to see his name on that ruddy cup,* Harry thought as he practiced a Sloth Grip Roll. It was hard to make sure you slung your body off the broom with enough force to swing up the other side... mainly because if you slung yourself too hard, you might lose your grip on your broom.

Harry knew he could catch the Snitch. Bludgers, on the other hand, had given him issues over the years. After a few practices he'd taken to playfully taunting Fred and George, trying to get them to knock him off his broomstick. At first, they were a little leery of damaging their Seeker and invoking the wrath of Wood. After a while they realized Harry would not be an easy mark and really got into it. Soon dodging their Bludger work became a full time job.

The first time his friends came to watch a practice; Harry had to stop Ron from telling off his brothers for trying to kill Harry. After that, Harry noticed that at least one of his friends was sitting in the stands every time they had a practice. Harry finally cornered Hermione in the library and asked her what that was all about.

"Well, if you must know, Ron... well, Ron was a little concerned."

“Concerned?”

“He talked to us about the practices. He, well, we agreed that one of us should be there, just in case - with our wands. You know, just in case...”

“...just in case Fred or George knock me off my broom, is that it?”

She nodded, perhaps a little fearfully.

“That’s... well, that’s really...” Harry swallowed. Having someone watching out for him was something he’d learned to do without for well over a year, ever since Ron died. “I appreciate that,” he said thickly.

Hermione looked up sharply when it seemed to sink in that he wasn’t going to get mad. Her eyes bored into him again. “Harry,” she said quietly, “there’s something I don’t understand.”

“Well, it isn’t hard to explain,” he said bitterly, “my aunt and uncle would throw a party if I fell off my broom and broke my neck. It... it feels sort of odd to know you guys are looking out for me. I know that sounds weird, but...”

“Harry,” she said softly. “Ron said you were almost certain something bad was going to happen on Halloween. How did you know that?”

Harry looked up at her and his stomach contracted into a small, hard ball. He fervently wished he’d approached Neville, or Ron, about the practices.

“I... I can tell there’s something you’re holding back, Harry. I don’t want to pry, but I can tell it’s bothering you. It’s bothering you a lot. Sometimes you look at us and you seem so... old and lost, I guess.” She swallowed and her face went pink. “It’s not just Ron that worries about you. I’d like to help,” she finished in a small voice.

He should have remembered how smart she was and realized it was only a matter of time before she caught on. He sighed. “That means a lot to me, more than you probably know. But I can’t. Not yet. It’s just too big.”

Hermione looked thoughtful for a moment, then slowly nodded.

"Can I owl you over the summer holidays?" Harry asked.

She nodded again, more sure this time.

"Okay, can we put this conversation on hold until then?"

"Yes. I think... I think I understand, Harry. At least a little."

"I'm sure you do," Harry said, cracking a smile. "You are clever, but that's all I can say for now."

Harry's pulse pounded in his ears as he left the library. He hoped he'd done the right thing. It wasn't surprising that Hermione figured out something was going on. He just wished it hadn't been that quick.

*I supposed I'm not quite as subtle as I thought I was, he thought ruefully. At least I know Hermione understands the need for discretion.*

He chuckled as he remembered the cursed sign-up sheet she'd created for the Defence Association. He had to admit it had also been lonely in some ways as well. He hadn't had anyone to talk to about changing fate and the future, not since he'd left Albus' portrait. He chuckled a little at the imagined look on her face when she realized exactly how many rules he'd broken.

Harry chose to avoid the still-limping Snape, since he had no interest in the man's activities this time around. Since Halloween night, his behaviour toward Harry had gone from hateful to downright chilling. Potions was proving to be an ordeal, and Harry was growing used to feeling random attacks on his defences as he tried to chop ingredients or stir his cauldron. At least while the man was obsessed with discovering Harry's secrets he would leave the others alone.

Of course, the reasons for his increased hatred were no mystery. After enduring a seemingly endless lecture from Percy regarding proper student behaviour, the prefect gave Harry the details of what happened after he was hauled off to the hospital wing. Professor Snape wanted them each docked fifty points and all four expelled. Professor McGonagall wouldn't hear of it, and once they learned of

Draco's role in the whole mess, she said that if anyone should be expelled, he was the one that had committed a deliberate offence. In the end, given that Harry's words were uttered while in deep shock, the headmaster decided they should just ignore the entire incident as far as punishments went. He said that Harry's injuries were more than sufficient to chastise both himself and his friends. Professor Snape went livid at that and began shouting, at which point Professor Dumbledore led them to his office for 'further discussions'... some of which reportedly had the gargoyles wincing.

After promising Percy one more time that he would *try* to stay out of trouble, Harry went back to his dormitory considering the story he heard to have been worth the lecture.

At least seeing the potions teacher limping implied that he had tested the defences surrounding the stone... so that was still on track.

Harry didn't get a lot of sleep the night before his first match, but it wasn't pre-game nerves this time. He jerked awake after enduring a vision of the ruins of Diagon Alley, and the massive crater that had once been the Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes shop. Panting, he stared up at the canopy over his silenced bed and waited for his pulse to stop racing. He wearily dragged himself down to the common room and worked on his latest letter to Ginny.

When the winter sun finally crept over the mountains, Harry's nerves were settled from the nightmare. He was surprised to notice a mounting excitement as he ate a light breakfast, ignoring the concerns and jeers from his classmates. He was just bloody happy to be playing Quidditch again. There were too many random factors that went on during a game for Harry's foreknowledge to spoil things. The first swerve he made differently would change the course of events; even if his greater confidence during the practices hadn't already done it. The big difference was that Harry wasn't going into this as a rookie – in some ways he had more playing experience than some of his team-mates. He could simply stop worrying and catch the Snitch – and maybe see if he could do it a little faster than the last time.

There was one event that he knew was probably inevitable, and for that reason he had his wand shoved up his sleeve, secured to his wrist by a knotted cord.

Oliver's pre-game pep-talk brought a feral smile to Harry's lips. The twins nudged him as they left the locker rooms and headed out to the pitch.

"Don't worry, Harrikins —"

"—we'll keep the Bludgers off you--"

"-though we know you can dodge them—"

"-as you are so apt to demonstrate—"

"We're veering from the topic oh brother of mine."

"Er, right. Anyway, we got your back—"

"Because if we don't,"

"-Ronniekins has threatened to thrash us—"

"-and I think he bloody well meant it!"

Harry let out a laugh that had his team-mates looking at him oddly. He shrugged "It's just Slytherin," he said.

"Er, mate," one twin began.

"You know they crushed us last year, right?" the other asked.

"Maybe," Harry smirked, "but this isn't last year, is it?"

Harry smiled and waved to Ron, Neville, and Hermione when he spotted them in the stands. Their home-made banner flashed in the sun, changing colours wildly. They waved back excitedly and Harry felt his heart soar. It was a great day to be flying.

The minute Harry kicked off from the ground he somehow knew this game would be different. He couldn't resist doing a loop as he took

his station high above the pitch and began looking out for the Snitch. He couldn't suppress a smile as Lee Jordan started calling the plays. His obviously biased commentary was just like he remembered; on the other hand, trying to hit a target as agile as Harry had been good practice for Fred and George. They attacked the Bludgers with a will, and pursued the Slytherin Chasers, as well as Terence Higgs, their Seeker, with lethal abandon. Minutes into the game, their Chasers were on the run and Angelina, Katie, and Alicia were scoring almost at will.

The first time the Snitch appeared, the Slytherin chaser was a lot closer than Harry. He leaned forward into a steep dive, but dumb luck was favouring Higgs. Harry poured on the speed, trying to catch up, when a twin-struck Bludger made a direct hit, knocking Higgs halfway off his broom. Unfortunately, the impact also made the Slytherin swerve into Harry's flight path and he had to veer off to avoid a collision. By the time he'd come back around, the Snitch was nowhere to be seen. They circled, waiting while the Slytherin captain called a time out to check his injured seeker.

"Sorry about that, Harry—"

"—bit of bad luck on the rebound!"

"Never mind," he shouted back to the twins. "That was brilliant work. He'd have beaten me to it otherwise."

After play resumed, Harry felt his broom lurch. Before it could throw him off, he had his wand out. He tapped it against the broom, saying "*Finite Incantatem*," as he did so, and the bucking stopped.

*Nice try, Quirrell, you two-faced bastard*, he snarled silently.

As high as Harry was hovering, no one seemed to notice. *They probably think I'm just waiting for the Snitch to appear, especially since Higgs is too banged up to fly very fast.* He kept his wand close to hand, and had to dispel the jinx twice more before the Snitch finally appeared.

Harry wheeled his Nimbus 2000 into a steep dive and was closing his left hand around the fluttering metal wings before people had even

started to react to its appearance. Ron and Neville were jumping up and down on each side of Hermione as Lee Jordan announced the final score, two hundred and seventy to twenty. Slytherin had been crushed.

Harry and his friends visited Hagrid after the game for a quick spot of tea, before heading back to the common room for the evening's post-game celebration. He hadn't been able to see very much of his first wizard friend since the term started, for which he felt a little guilty. Thinking back, he realized many of his prior reality's visits to Hagrid seemed to involve pumping him for information about the mysterious goings on at Hogwarts. This left him feeling even guiltier.

Instead of arguing about jinxed brooms, or pumping him for information, they spent the afternoon hearing stories from when the Weasleys, Longbottoms, and Potters attended Hogwarts.

Ron turned purple when Hagrid innocently mentioned covering for Arthur and Molly with old Ogg when they'd almost been caught in the Astronomy tower after hours. Evidently Hagrid wasn't aware of the reasons why the older students like to spend time there... in pairs. Harry supposed having five older brothers meant knowing more about that sort of thing than you really wanted to at the age of eleven.

Neville never suspected that Hagrid knew his parents. The groundskeeper told how they ended up dating after placing first and second in a school duelling contest. By the time he finished the story, Neville was almost too choked up to speak.

Harry had the opportunity to hear a few stories about his parents over the years, but he was still laughing by the time Hagrid finished. The story he told was about how second year Lily Evans, enraged by one prank too many, hexed James Potter so hard that every single hair fell out of his head, including his eyebrows and eyelashes. She'd been horrified afterwards of course, but James thought it was funny, and covered for her, telling his head of house it was a potions accident.

Hermione looked a little wistful, so Harry asked her to tell them about her parents. The workings of Muggle dentistry were as arcane and bizarre to Wizarding folk as magic was to Muggles. Her audience was

quite enthralled and asked tons of questions, which had her quite pink by the time they had to head back to the castle.

*Yeah, things are looking up.*

A/N

Okay, sorry for the later posting today, but I wanted to get a little more into this update. I may not be able to keep to a sizable and daily update, as it seems to take around thirty hours to generate 9k+ words and do everything else, including sleep. )

Now, on to the comments!

The title – yes it is a reference to one of the better X-men story arcs of all time... at least in my less than completely humble opinion, anyway.

Yes, Snape is petty. It's even worse this time because he can't manipulate and control Harry as much this time around. Tormenting the son of James Potter was something he'd been looking forward to, especially since the man he hated was already dead. Harry came back in time already hating Snape for killing Dumbledore, and his demonstration during the first potions class served to really antagonize the man. The fact that Dumbledore and McGonagall seem to be taking Harry's side against him isn't helping things either. Personally, I think JKR is going to have to pull a 400 pound rabbit out of her hat to completely redeem Snape in book seven. So, for this story, Snape's malevolence is magnified because Harry is not as easy a target as he was the first time around. What that may or may not evolve into later on is something you will have stay tuned to find out...

There are indications that Ginny has an unusual degree of magical power (aside from the whole 7th daughter thing). She had enough magic at age six to power and fly on her brothers' adult brooms, when she nicked them from the broom shed at night. George said of her "size is no indication of magical power". And honestly, I don't see the baby sister in a family like the Weasleys turning out the way Ginny did in canon if she didn't have some moderately effective ways of



defending herself. And if all those reasons fail, consider it a tip of the hat to intronit, who wrote one of my favorite stories in this genre.

Yes, Snape was not allowed to dock 100 points from Harry for pretty much no reason. McGonagall also nearly lost her temper and hexed him when she found out about the legilimency. This had led to relations between the two professors being even cooler than they were in canon. And that was pretty frosty as it was.

This story may end up running rather long. On the other hand, I'm going to try and update as quickly as possible (daily if I can) so it doesn't go stale for anyone.

Yes, Harry is emotional. Someone with a background in abnormal psychology might recognize the signs of post-traumatic stress disorder.

Draco's power level... I knew this was going to raise some questions! I'll give my theory first, then provide the evidence. Theory: Wealthy Pureblood children probably receive a lot of tutoring in certain aspects of magic, even before attending Hogwarts. This may be for protective reasons, as their wealth and prominence may make them targets, or it may be in order to make them easier to indoctrinate with certain ideas and philosophies (the Dark Arts are said to be seductive, and the power addictive). Professor Snape, when a student of Hogwarts, was described as "Snape knew more curses when he arrived at school than half the kids in seventh year, " (Sirius, from Goblet of Fire). As far as Draco goes, no he didn't use Stupefy in the dueling club his second year. Instead, at Snape's whispered suggestion, he used "Serpensortia" a conjuring spell, something that is considered NEWT level magic and not taught at Hogwarts until at least sixth year. (According to McGonagall - see OOTP, p. 257). I think that also helps explain Draco's arrogance and influence among the Slytherin students, some of whom also come from equally wealthy families. I imagine he has been instructed not to display too great a knowledge of combat magic in public, but it would still make him swagger – and knowing he could hex people but not being allowed to would account for some of his temper. That's all in canon. Now here, the merged Harry is more confrontational, and his greater skill is making Draco escalate a bit earlier than he did the first time

around. The differences in Harry are like a stone dropped into a still pool – the ripples are spreading, and soon some of them will be reflecting back to the point of impact. (Also note that Crabbe and Goyle missed horribly when they tried to cast Stupefy on Harry. They are more than likely doofuses.)

I don't think the canon relationships are too clichéd as *an objective* for this story – remember that this Harry lived through the canon storyline, so that's what he's going to try and work towards... and God help anyone who gets in his way. (And yes, that is a potential flaw in his character.)

If I **ever** spend fifteen pages describing someone packing their trunk... well hopefully it'll be because I've got a lot of recollections or plot exposition going on... as opposed to being possessed by Robert Jordan.

Thanks for the kind words regarding layoffs. I got a pretty decent severance package, and my wife is still working. (She's also supporting me taking a break to write, so think nice thoughts about Runsamok.)

Harry wasn't sure which direction his soul would travel when he died. That's why the prisms were arranged to wrap the transit field completely around him. Fortunately, the Avada Kedavra blasted his soul immediately out of his body and into the field, before the flying wand could strike it. Yes, his soul could have immediately traveled downwards, but Future Harry wasn't that awful a person, was he? )

Also, Hermione does better than Draco on her schoolwork. And that includes home work, essays, and written tests... things that depend of factors aside from raw magical power. Power and knowledge are not always the same thing. Draco's tutoring at home was also likely... specialized... in certain areas. In any event, if Snape had sent them to ambush Harry and read his mail, he might have just taught Draco the summoning charm beforehand. (Remember it didn't work that well, and isn't it funny how Snape just *happened* to show up when he did? I suppose if you can't break into someone's mind, it can't hurt to read their mail, can it?) Yes I like being an evil bastidge when writing

Snape. I have a LOT of experience as a Dungeon-Master that comes into play...

I use Scene Break between chapter-lets because the system here, for some inexplicable reason, deletes any punctuation marks used to denote boundaries. I like the wide-ranging audience here at but the interface occasionally leaves something to be desired. Or I can just start using Rowlings-sized chapters – in which case we'd be on chapter twenty or twenty-five at this point. )

By the way, if someone does know a punctuation combination that does consistently work here, please let me know!

I like the questions my reviewers raise, so don't worry about giving offense. Adding these author's notes to a chapter is like a good treacle tart after my shepherd's pie...

-Matthew

## Chapter 6

Things calmed down a bit after the match. The school was abuzz the following Monday of course, but the upset of the feared Slytherin house team seemed to have deflated them considerably. Even Draco Malfoy had pulled in his horns, to Harry's silent relief. He wasn't afraid of the pureblood boy so much as alarmed at how quickly their antagonism had heated up, even compared to their past history. Harry wasn't as easily confused or intimidated as he was before, and his refusal to back down at all seemed to infuriate the boy.

Harry also admitted to himself that it was not completely one-sided either. That conversation on the way to the Halloween Feast had been a well-rehearsed act of deliberate cruelty. He was honestly a little afraid of what he might find himself doing if the spoiled Slytherin pushed him too far. *It simply wouldn't do for a first year student to be casting Unforgivables*, he grumbled to himself.

At least the morning exercise sessions gave him a way to relieve his stress. Ron was picking things up quickly, though Neville and Hermione weren't far behind. Harry had to start using the books he'd purchased over the summer to find new techniques and exercises. Of course, once Hermione saw the books, she was all over borrowing them. Soon she was as conversant with the dry facts as Harry, but she still had to work on making her body do the movements correctly. Neville just worked his arse off.

Snape, of course, was as unpleasant as ever. Harry was sorely disappointed when Professor McGonagall called him to her office and informed him that there was currently no one available to take his place. He almost asked her about Horace Slughorn, but remembered that it had taken all of his and Dumbledore's persuasiveness to coax the round little man out of retirement. Now Harry could only hope that word about the search didn't get back to the ill-tempered potions instructor – though he didn't really imagine things could get any worse. Potions was becoming a torture.

At least once a class, he would feel the professor prying at his mental shields. To avoid arousing too much suspicion, Harry tempered his reaction. The first couple of times, he just flinched as he repelling the

attack. Then he began looking up when Snape struck. Finally he began responding with glares and by pushing back a little with his own Legilimency. He started off slowly, with little fitful bursts of it. Harry wanted to stay in character as someone who was a natural Occlumens, and starting to slowly develop a bit of Legilimency in response to the constant probing. The constant sparring wasn't so much interesting, as just irritating. Though he supposed after blocking out Voldemort for years, not much else could be challenging.

And so November passed nervously into December. The castle turned drafty and cold, and the humidity in the dungeons made it even worse. Professor Flitwick, after Harry asked him about it, took a few minutes to show them how to do a warming charm. The tiny professor beamed when he saw how eager the students were to learn this particular bit of magic.

Professor Snape, on the other hand, pounced on Hermione the following Friday when he saw her using it. She'd cast the warming charm on her hands, which were stiffening from the cold and chopping dandelion roots. No sooner had she finished than he took away five points and confiscated her wand.

Hermione's cheeks burned with humiliation, while Ron chopped the remaining ingredients so violently that it was a wonder he didn't dice up a finger. Malfoy said something Harry couldn't make out. Ron whirled around so quickly, stained knife clenched in his fist, that Malfoy jumped back in surprise. Fortunately, Ron turned back around and was working again before Snape could find another excuse to dock house points.

When the class was over, Hermione was one of the last to turn in her vial. Harry, Neville, and Ron loitered near the doorway. Professor Snape, now reading a tattered old manuscript, pointedly ignored her.

She waited a moment, and finally cleared her throat. "Er, Professor?"

Snape looked up from his reading, dark hooded eyes glaring. "Yes, Granger?"

Hermione took a half step back, but then seemed to gather herself. Raising her chin, she simply said, "My wand, sir."

He sat there for a moment, his eyes boring into her, and Harry's stomach clenched. He knew the bastard was rummaging around in her memories while he stood helpless and watched it happen. He hoped none of the oblique hints he'd made to Hermione would seem significant to Snape.

After a moment, Snape stood. He reached into a drawer and pulled out Hermione's wand. He held it for a moment in both hands, fingertips barely touching the polished wood. He stared down at the bushy-haired witch, and they seemed frozen in place as Harry's teeth began to grind.

"I'd be doing you a favour if I snapped this," he said softly. "There are many with far less tolerance for precocious Mudbloods than I."

Harry clamped down on his emotions, even as he saw Hermione stiffen. From the corner of his eye he saw movement. Neville and Ron were in the doorway, Neville's fingertips sinking into his friend's shoulders as he held him back.

"I appreciate your concern, Professor," Hermione said frostily. "Though I imagine I will be forced to deal with people like that all my life."

Professor Snape just sneered, and tossed the wand at Hermione's feet with a negligent gesture. She stepped forward and snatched it out of the air with an uncharacteristically quick motion. She spun on her heel to leave.

A rich coppery taste flooded Harry's mouth, and he realized he'd bitten his tongue. A low musical tinkling filled the potions classroom as the jars, vials, and assorted glassware all began to vibrate. Snape's eyes moved from Hermione's retreat to Harry's furious glare. Instantly, he felt the man's mind picking away at his barriers again.

At first, Harry intended to merely use his own magic to push the man back. However, he was too angry to completely hold himself in check, and his Legilimency engulfed and dispersed the potion master's thrust. Harry's counterstroke tore at Snape's Occlumency shields, and suddenly his mind was flooded with images.

*Snape talking to a man in black... white-haired but not old... news of a fight on the train... a heavy bag changing hands... find out everything you can, Severus... I can be quite generous...*

An instant later his vision cleared. Snape had taken a couple of steps back from his desk and his sallow skin was very pale. Harry remembered the role he had to play, so he clapped his hands to his temples and fell to his knees. "What the hell did you just do to me?" he cried out and let his temper go. His pulse throbbed in his temples as half a dozen bottles suddenly shattered.

Ron and Neville half-dragged, half-carried him out of the lab, and Hermione slammed the door behind them. Harry was unresisting as he let his friends hustle him back to the Gryffindor tower. Controlling himself today had left him far wearier than if he'd actually vaporized the greasy git.

Begging off with a headache, he stretched out on his bed for a bit of a lie-down, as his friends went to lunch. His pounding headache slowly eased and he began sorting through the bits and pieces Snape had let slip.

*I'd be willing to bet that white-haired man is Lucius Malfoy. Had he... hired... Snape to investigate me? Bloody hell. Did he do that before? Or did he do it because I stood up to Draco on the train?*

Questions with no answers chased each other around his head until he dropped off into an exhausted sleep.

*Malfoy Manor was a blazing ruins, the roof and two walls gone. Harry knelt on the scorched grass outside, amongst the black-robed bodies of more than a dozen Death-Eaters. Tonks lay with her head propped up in his lap. Her stomach was a red ruin and her legs were bent at odd angles.*

*"Wotcher, Harry," she mumbled, the shock dragging her down even as it numbed her pain.*

*"Wotcher, Tonks" Harry whispered. He felt her hand tighten on his.*

*"You got him, yeah?"*

*“Ron did. Took his head off, just wished we’d been a little faster...”*

*“Don’t worry, luv, I’m off to see Remus and Sirius now,” Tonks said, smiling dreamily as her eyes began to glaze over.*

*“It should be quite a party by now,” Harry said, unable to mask the bitterness in his voice.*

*“It will be, Harry. Just make sure you send Tom on ahead before you try to catch up, will ya?” She coughed a little and paled.*

*“Don’t worry, I will,” he assured her. Her grip loosened and he felt his throat close. He could tell she was almost gone. “Tell Ginny I’ll be along soon,” he whispered.*

Harry felt hands shaking him and sat up, twisting to try and throw them off. Ron and Neville jumped back beyond the canopy. He could see their mouths moving, but no sound came out. Harry sighed and swung his feet out onto the floor and leaned his head forward until it was beyond the silencing charms.

“My goodness, Harry, that must have been an awful nightmare,” Hermione gasped. She was standing behind Ron, a concerned frown creasing her face.

“Snoring. Right,” Ron said flatly. “You’re still having those ruddy nightmares, aren’t you?”

For a moment, Harry was so disoriented that he couldn’t keep up with his lies, with what he could and couldn’t tell people. He just nodded, staring down at his shaking hands.

*Seeing Lucius in Snape’s memories must have triggered that. I dreamt about the night Ron killed him, the man responsible for Arthur’s death.* Harry took a deep breath and looked up at his friends.

Ron still glared at him in an accusing fashion. “Why didn’t you tell us, mate? We’re your friends, aren’t we?” Harry opened his mouth to answer and then closed it.



“Ronald, please,” Hermione said firmly. “Harry,” she continued in a gentler tone, “what were you dreaming about?”

Harry looked at her helplessly.

“L-leave him alone, Hermione,” Neville said, stepping around the bed. ‘M-maybe he doesn’t want to talk about it.’

Ron just sighed and walked out of the room.

Hermione stood her ground. “Something has to be bothering him to have dreams like that,” she insisted.

“If something bad happens to people you care about,” Neville said slowly, “it can give you bad dreams years later.”

Harry knew Neville meant more than he was saying.

“Hermione, I’ll be fine,” Harry said, collecting his thoughts. “I wonder if that nightmare had something to do with Snape. I think he did something to me.”

“Harry, he didn’t have his wand out,” she objected.

“Are there any types of magic that don’t always require a wand to use?”

She looked thoughtful and nodded.

“Maybe you could check into that?”

Hermione got that maniacal gleam in her eye that Harry remembered so well. She turned to go, probably straight to the library, but stopped at the doorway and looked at him. “How did I get volunteered to do this?” she asked with a slight smile.

“Because I’m knackered,” Harry replied. “And because you’re smarter than I am.”

Hermione smiled and her face went red again. “Just checking,” she said as she closed the door behind her. *If she puts it together from*

*the facts she's been given, even Snape digging all the details out of her can only conclude that I'm clueless and she's effing brilliant.*

Neville moved to follow her out. "I'll talk to Ron," he said.

Harry called out and the boy halted. "Thank you, Neville. For everything."

Neville just shrugged and looked down at his feet.

Harry cleared his throat. "I read about the Lestrage trial in *The Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts*. There's a whole chapter in there."

Neville froze in place, staring at Harry.

Harry met his gaze. "We have a lot in common, don't we?"

The boy nodded thoughtfully.

"I'm glad you're my friend, Nev. It's good to have a Longbottom standing with me, yeah?"

Neville Longbottom swallowed then drew himself up straight. He set his jaw and nodded curtly to Harry, then stepped through the doorway.

Harry stared after him a moment, wondering at what a handful of words can do. He shook himself and dug into his bag, pulling out his latest letter. He scanned the last page, tapping a self-inking quill against his chin, and then began a new paragraph.

Harry was looking forward to what he anticipated would be the best Christmas he'd had in years... either way you wanted to count it.

Ginny wrote that she was excited to see her brother Charlie in Romania, but she seemed a little wistful when she asked Harry what his holiday plans were. He wrote back that he didn't really have any, and was staying at Hogwarts with Ron and the Twins. She didn't ask why he was staying, but Ron wasn't as circumspect. Harry finally told him flat out that the Dursleys didn't want him around, and when he was there he wasn't part of the Christmas celebrations anyway.

Harry resisted the urge to snap at his friend. It wasn't so much that he was being thick as that he couldn't wrap his head around the fact that people like the Dursleys existed. He didn't disbelieve Harry, but he couldn't understand why anyone would treat a family member like that. The Weasleys were not a tribe of red-headed saints, but they were a loving family and stood by each other. Percy's estrangement after the Tri-Wizard Tournament had upset them terribly.

Not unexpectedly, Malfoy made a few cracks about Harry not having any proper family. Harry responded by smiling at the Slytherin, thinking *maybe not yet...* Draco seemed to find that rather disconcerting, and dropped the subject after a couple of days.

Hermione and Neville both felt an inexplicable need to apologize to Harry for leaving for the holidays. When they brought the matter up at the last dinner before end of term, Harry just blinked in confusion.

"I talked to my Gran, and she wouldn't hear of it," Neville said mournfully. "Uncle Algie is planning a family reunion after Boxing Day, and she wants everyone to be there..."

"I don't really have an excuse, Harry," Hermione cut in, "It's just, I'm an only child, and my parents miss me terribly. They said so in their last letter and I couldn't even bring myself to ask."

Harry looked at each of them, and then at Ron, who sat there stony-faced, chewing a mouthful of roast chicken. "Wait, I don't want you lot to miss time with your families," he said.

"Yes, but you're going to be stuck here-" Hermione said, but was cut off.

"With me, yeah?" Ron said disgustedly.

"Ron, I didn't mean it that way," Hermione sniffed.

"...and they're off!" Harry muttered to Neville.

Ron seemed to have picked that up, because he bit off his reply and looked over at Harry.

Harry held up his hands. "Besides, we'll have the Twins chaperoning, what could possibly go wrong?"

That made all four of them laugh, and drew a few looks from two red-headed blokes sitting further up the table.

Hermione shook her head. "I, well, we just didn't want you to think... we..."

Harry snorted. "Just keep training you two... I may not be there to work on the next kata, but you could both use some endurance work. Just keep running and we'll catch up when you get back, all right?"

Harry thought about that conversation as they returned to their common room and the students began packing. Neville wasn't that close to their group last time around, but he didn't remember Hermione apologizing for going home for the holidays. What brought that on?

He and Ron picked a quiet corner and settled down for a game of Wizarding chess. He asked Ron about the game months earlier this time around because he remembered that playing it always put Ron in a good mood. Harry also suspected that Ron's skill at chess had something to do with some of the skills he displayed during the war. Ulterior motives aside, his friend also loved chess nearly as much as he did Quidditch.

The quiet logic of the chessboard also helped Harry think, even if his game play was rubbish. After several moves he had an inkling of what might have happened before dinner. He looked across at his friend who was frowning down at the board.

"Ron?"

"Yeah?" he replied as he took Harry's bishop.

"Did you say something to Hermione and Nev about the winter hols?"

"Maybe... Look, I just don't get it. Those Muggles took you in. Why would they do that if they hated you, mate?"

“I don’t know. Maybe someone made them. Maybe they were worried what it would look like if they refused. I’m past wasting energy trying to figure them out.”

Ron looked up, a sickly grimace on his face.

“Look mate,” Harry said firmly. “As far as I’m concerned, I’ve almost won. I now spend nine months out of the year at Hogwarts. I just have to get past the summers now. In a few years I’ll be totally shed of them and I’ll never have to see a Dursley again. “

Ron just sighed and they let the conversation drop as they watched Ron’s pieces annihilate Harry’s defences. *Some things never change*, Harry thought with a resigned sigh as they set up the pieces for another game.

The break from classes was pretty relaxing, even if they weren’t as idle this time around. With most of the non-Weasley students gone, Harry and Ron pushed some furniture aside and practiced their martial arts in the common room. Though the floor was a little harder than the frozen ground outside, the room was much warmer.

Fred and George wandered down that first morning, blinking and yawning to see their brother and his friend sparring. They ran down there to break up the fight, only to have both boys start laughing hysterically. They were a little put out, thinking they’d been pranked, until Harry explained about Muggle martial arts.

The twins thought the whole thing was barmy, once they realized why the “ickle firsties were getting up so sodding early every morning”. They started looking thoughtful though, after Ron said they could learn a thing or two from Harry. Ron offered to spar with either of his brothers, with Harry refereeing, and promptly put George in a submission hold. Ron was still shorter than his brothers, being two years younger, and was much lighter in build... a fact which was not lost on the twins.

After that, the Weasley twins started sitting in on their practices in the common room, sparring with each other, though not without a goodly measure of horseplay. Harry wondered, a little morbidly, if something

he taught them might help when the Death Eaters marched on Diagon Alley.

On Christmas Eve, Harry stayed up later than usual, hoping his shortened sleeping habits would at least let him last until morning. He worked on another letter for Ginny as he tried to banish the tension building up in his stomach. He'd done some things a little differently this time, and he was worried about spoiling things. If Mrs. Weasley didn't feel the same way about him this time around, tomorrow he'd know when no jumper arrived. She hadn't heard him ask how to get through the barrier at King Cross, and her daughter had helped him instead. Now her only daughter was exchanging letters with a boy she'd only met once in passing. The whole thing probably made Molly Weasley very uncomfortable. She'd probably also have severe misgivings about ever having such a strange boy over at The Burrow, whether he was friends with Ron or not.

Harry pushed those thoughts aside before they drove him mad. Instead he wrote to Ginny about his day, letting the scritch-scritch of quill on parchment quiet his mind. She knew about the martial arts they were practicing in the mornings, but he knew she'd appreciate hearing about Ron getting the better of one of his prankster older brothers. Harry sat, chewing on the end of his quill for a moment, then continued writing. He mentioned in passing that of course she'd be welcome to join them once she came to Hogwarts. He wrote about how Percy avoided his brothers to sit with the other prefects who stayed for the holidays, and how that annoyed Ron as well as the twins. He bit his lip for a moment, and then wrote about how much he enjoyed her letters and was glad she'd written them. He also told her he hoped she enjoyed the book he'd ordered for her from Flourish and Blotts, as it was one of his and Ron's favourite library books.

Harry signed off and closed the letter, folding it up and sealing it before he lost his nerve. He slipped out of the dormitory without waking Ron. His friend had insisted, after the ambush near the Owlery, that Harry not travel alone through the castle. While Harry didn't fault his logic, he knew that Malfoy and his cronies had left for the winter holidays, so the castle should be safe.

Nonetheless, Harry tucked his letter securely into his robes, and carried his wand in his hand, hidden by the loose sleeve. He didn't go anywhere unprepared if he could help it.

He made it to the base of the Owlery stairs before a voice stopped him.

"Hello Harry."

Harry jumped, but he recognized the voice so he didn't bring out his wand as he turned around.

"Hello, Professor Dumbledore."

The headmaster was dressed in dark green robes. Tiny red house elves were lined up along the trim and the seams, arms linked, dancing to some unheard music. The old man smiled and his eyes twinkled "You seem to be out a bit late this evening."

Harry was out well past curfew, but he didn't know if it actually applied right now or not. *I suppose it applies if he says so*, Harry mused, *best to just go with the truth*. "I was up late finishing a Christmas letter," he said, extracting the letter and holding it up.

"Ah, I see. I'm sure your guardians will be please to hear from you."

Harry couldn't suppress a shudder. "Oh no, sir. This is to a friend."

The headmaster's blue eyes began twinkling a little faster and Harry felt that feather-light touch on his mind again. Harry flinched and took a step back. He frowned and looked around in confusion. "What was that?" he demanded. "I felt like something touched me. Was that Peeves?" Harry let a panicked note creep into his voice and pulled his wand out.

"Harry, please calm yourself."

"That's easy for you to say," Harry retorted, manners forgotten, spinning back and forth, wand at the ready. "You aren't getting poked every other day. It always happens in... wait," Harry said as he

stopped and turned back toward Dumbledore. "It only happens when I'm in potions or your office. And now."

"Harry, Hogwarts is full of magic, some of it may seem very odd at times—"

"None of my friends are feeling that, sir, no matter where they go."

"Perhaps you are just a bit more sensitive to certain types of magic than other people," the old man said before he paused for a moment. "Harry, sometimes it is necessary to do things one might prefer not to... but rest assured that the safety of Hogwarts and all its students is always my highest priority."

*Is he implying that he knows about Snape trying to probe my mind? The old Albus never mentioned that, so it must be new. Is this a set-up to feed Lucius false information about The Boy Who Lived? Or is Snape just selling that information on the side?*

Harry had to remind himself that he was supposed to be an eleven year old boy and not start sampling the vocabulary he picked up from the Americans. "Sir, I- I'm sorry, but it's hard to just accept that when I don't understand what's going on, especially when it hurts. I'm starting to think coming here might have been a mistake."

Harry almost laughed at the shocked look that flickered across the headmaster's features. Harry Potter quitting Hogwarts because he'd become afraid of magic would be an utter disaster for Dumbledore and his allies. Harry would never cut out on them, but the old man had no way of knowing that.

"Harry, your mother and father would never want you to abandon your heritage," Dumbledore said, playing his trump card.

Harry admired his skill. That would have been devastatingly effective for persuading the original Harry, no doubt about it.

*But two can play the guilt game.*

Harry drew back like he'd been slapped. "Don't ever speak to me of those people again!" he hissed.



Dumbledore actually looked shocked.

“They may have been responsible for me being here, but when they died they left me to be sent to the *Dursleys*,” he snarled, spitting the last word like an expletive. Harry had made peace with Albus years ago, and understood why the old man had placed him with Muggle relatives to keep him from getting a big head. He just wished Dumbledore had possessed a little more faith in his innate character, and a little less faith in the character of the Dursleys. Harry knew that his parents had actually wanted him to be cared for by Sirius, but he let himself appear to be misinformed. That just made it easier for him to work on driving a wedge into the cracks of Dumbledore’s sense of always knowing what’s best for everyone.

“I think I’d have been happier dying myself, than putting up with what went on in that house, so don’t talk to me about what my parents would have wanted!” Harry spat, letting himself get red in the face – partly from embarrassment. He knew he sounded childish, but that was the whole point.

The headmaster’s face had gone pale, and he looked like he’d eaten something that disagreed with him. It reminded Harry uncannily of the face the portrait had made during their discussion that night. “Harry, I am sorry for what happened, more than you will probably ever know. I didn’t mean to upset you by bringing that up. I promise you I will see what can be done about that other issue as well.”

Harry still red-faced, just nodded jerkily.

“The hour is late, my boy, you should send your owl and head straight to bed,” Dumbledore said before he smiled, and his eyes started twinkling again. “Father Christmas will probably be paying you a visit soon.”

Harry turned to go, but muttered a final shot that he knew the headmaster wouldn’t miss: “Why should this year be different?”

Harry stood in the Owlery for several minutes, watching the white glow of Hedwig’s feathers fade into the distance, letting the icy air cool his face. He’d tapped into some of his anger about his childhood to make his performance real, and now he was paying the price; his

stomach was tied in knots. The fact that the events prior to his eleventh birthday had been lived **twice**, once by each spirit, just made them weigh him down all the more. The fact that a spectacularly misinformed Death Eater killed his aunt and uncle after he left home just made it all the worse. In a sense, they were right. He *had* ruined their lives. Not through his choices, but through theirs. He offered, out of a sense of duty to his mother, to move them to a safe house after the blood wards expired. His letter returned unopened, and multiple phone calls only allowed him to get a couple of words in before their phone was changed to an unlisted number. Nonetheless, they might have survived the war if it were not for their connection to Harry.

Not that he cried at their funeral.

Harry stood a while longer in the chilly Owlery, listening to the soothing murmur coming from the crowded perches. Finally, he sighed and headed back to his dormitory.

Harry awoke; momentarily puzzled by the sense of dread he was feeling. Then he remembered and jumped out of bed. Ron was already sitting next to the pile of presents at the foot of his bed. Harry ignored the cold stone under his bare feet as he got up and peered around the corner of his bed.

There was a present missing.

The top present was wrapped in thick brown paper marked with Hagrid's thick scrawl. Harry knew it contained a carved wooden flute, but was also aware of Ron watching him open his first Christmas present. Feeling a bit like a performer on stage, Harry focused on opening it carefully. When he blew on the end of the flute, he idly wondered where Hedwig was at that moment.

When Harry moved the wrappings aside, the small parcel from the Dursleys, containing a fifty-pence piece, was not there. He wondered about that for a moment, until he remembered how quiet his aunt became after their last argument, pretending he did not exist. *Fine by me*, he thought absently, as he stared at the lumpy package underneath.

Ron looked over at him. "I think that may be from my Mum. I, er, may have mentioned that you didn't expect to get a lot of presents," he said apologetically.

Harry was busy opening the paper.

"Oh boy," Ron sighed. "She went and knitted you a Weasley jumper. Sorry, mate."

Harry held up the thick emerald green fabric, swallowing to keep his throat from closing. "Are you barking mad?" he choked out. "This is brilliant!"

"It's just a sweater, Harry. She makes one for each of us every year. Mine is always maroon though."

"There's a Muggle saying," Harry began, his voice coming back.

*I haven't bollixed it up! I can still make this work!*

"It's the thought that counts. Your Mum doesn't even know me and she took the time to knit me this... it's just. I don't know what to say," Harry sputtered.

"Calm down, Harry," Ron laughed. "I guess you like it then?"

Harry laughed back and pulled the jumper on over his pyjamas. When he looked down at the box of fudge however, there was another bit of fabric there. It was a somewhat irregular length of knitted material. It was partly of the same green as the sweater, with a portion of sable yarn making up the rest. The knots were a bit uneven, and the edges tended to waver a bit, but the irregular tangle of black and green was sort of eye-catching. Harry held it up for a moment, unfolding it, until he realized it was a scarf. He was distracted from the pattern when Ron burst out laughing.

"Oh Merlin, Mum's been after Ginny to learn knitting again, and it looks like you got to be the victim! Wait until Fred and George see that mess!" Ron crowed.

Harry glared over at his friend, who was almost lying down on the cold stone floor. "You let Ginny hear you say that, she's likely to see if there really is such a thing as a castrating charm."

Ron's head popped up off the floor, a look of horror on his face.

"Ginny mentioned what happened the last time she tried to knit, so I know this was a lot of effort for her," Harry said firmly. "I'll thank you not to sneer like a bloody Malfoy!"

Harry knew that was a low blow, but it shut Ron up immediately. "Sorry Harry, but you don't really have to wear it you know."

"Why not? It's warm, I like the colors, and it matches my favourite jumper," Harry shot back, still scowling. He'd sort of put himself through the wringer in the last twelve hours, and he wasn't ready to deal with Ron's lapses into thick-headedness.

"Blimey, forget I said anything," Ron muttered.

Harry sighed. "All right. Ron, remember when you asked me why I got so angry when Malfoy nicked my letter?"

Ron nodded.

"Remember when I told you how many Christmases I've celebrated before this one?"

Ron nodded again, looking down. "Same thing, yeah?"

"Spot on, mate."

Ron's ears got redder. "I wasn't trying to Malfoy your Christmas, Harry."

"You didn't Ron. If it wasn't for you, this wouldn't be near as special, you know? Just don't forget you have a brilliant family... especially when ignorant people start running them down."

They were quiet for a moment, then grinned at each other and resumed opening presents again. Harry sat back and nibbled on a

piece of really excellent home-made fudge when he saw Ron opening the delivery parcel from Flourish and Blotts. When the eye-gouging orange cover of *Flying with the Cannons* was revealed, Ron's mouth fell open in shock.

*Now maybe he won't buy that ruddy book for me next Christmas,* Harry thought, snickering under his breath.

Harry sent people a lot of books as gifts this year. Part of this was to reinforce his book-a-holic image, and part of this was because he wasn't allowed to leave the school grounds and the booksellers in Diagon Alley ran a thriving owl delivery business.

Ron, true to his food-obsessed self, gave him a box of candy. Hermione sent Ron some Every Flavour Beans, but sent Harry a Muggle book on Aikido, along with a note saying he might find it interesting for their morning training sessions. Harry knew buying Hermione a book was a risky proposition, given the rate she picked up new ones. So instead he just sent her a note explaining he'd set up a small tab for her at Flourish and Blotts, and how their owl delivery system worked.

Harry also received a small package from Neville. He hoped his friend enjoyed the pocket Herbology field guide he'd ordered for him. When he unwrapped the package, Harry's breath caught in his throat. There, in a simple wooden frame, was a Wizing picture with two couples beaming up at him. The women were both propped up on what looked like hospital beds, each holding up a baby for him to see. Next to each woman stood a man beaming with pride one moment and looking down with wonder at their new family the next. Harry immediately recognized his mother and father on the left. The woman on the right had a round face that looked a lot like Neville's. She didn't look anything like the grey-haired woman, thin and worn, that Harry met during Christmas break of his fifth year. Harry just sat there, stunned.

*We were born about a day apart, weren't we?*

He looked up to see Ron looking at him curiously, and Harry realized his face was a little red. He simply held up the picture so Ron could see.

"Is that your Mum and Dad?" Ron asked quietly.

"Yeah," Harry said softly. "Nev and I have almost the same birthday. I guess our folks all ended up at the same hospital or something. Do they have a maternity ward at Saint Mungo's?"

Ron shook his head and shrugged. "Don't know, mate. The Weasley kids were all born at home. Why do you look like you've seen a grim?"

"Well, I've never seen a picture of my mum or dad before," Harry said his voice trailing off as he turned the picture around again. "I look a bit like him, don't I?"

"More than a bit," Ron agreed, though his face had gone pale. "Your aunt and uncle didn't...? No, stupid question, innit?"

Harry shrugged himself, staring at the happy couples.

Finally, he shook himself and opened the last package. Ron was surprised to see the invisibility cloak spill out, but managed not to gush quite as hard this time. The accompanying note with the loopy handwriting was worded slightly different than Harry remembered:

*Your father left this cloak in my possession before he died. He would want you to have it, and thus I return it to you.*

*Use it well.*

*-A Very Merry Christmas to You*

Harry stared at the note for a long moment.

*I suppose he said it that way to address the bitterness toward my parents I displayed last night. I guess it does show that he was listening to what I was saying. We'll see later on how well he remembers it though.*

The rest of the day passed as enjoyably as Harry remembered. He feasted with the four Weasley brothers, wearing the jumper and the scarf all day, no matter how much Gred and Forge teased him about

it. It felt good to relax and just enjoy the day. A day in which there was nothing he needed to change, and he could just be himself again, was a treasure indeed.

After that, Harry made the most of his father's cloak, but definitely changed his approach this time. He had no interest in re-exploring a castle he knew like the back of his hand. He also wanted to avoid the Mirror of Erised like the bloody plague. If Dumbledore got any idea of what Harry saw in the mirror, the jig would be up. Harry also wasn't sure if he could stand to see his heart's desire either, and his sanity was not something he cared to risk after all this work.

Instead, he raided the Restricted Section of the library with a will. A simple detection charm was sufficient to show which books were trapped, and sometimes it was easy to avoid the triggering condition, or disable it with *Finite Incantatem*. Harry had only had the opportunity to read a few of these books before the library was destroyed during the massacre. Scanning through the titles, Harry picked out anything having to do with time, fate, or paradoxes. If he was about to paint himself into a corner, it was best he know as quickly as possible.

He spent the balance of his holidays either working with Ron and the twins in the mornings, reading books crouched down in the restricted section or smuggled back to his room, or adding a few more inches to his latest letter to Ginny.

*Dear Harry,*

*Romania has got to be the coldest place on Earth. If it isn't, I don't want to even think about visiting the winner. All the same, Mum and Dad and I had a great time visiting Charlie. He's absolutely mad about dragons, and doesn't even seem to notice that he's always sporting a half-healed burn. Still, they are gorgeous creatures, and I can see why he loves them. I just prefer to admire them from a distance.*

*Thank you so much for the book! Reading through it, I had no idea the game had such a long history. I've read about all the positions, thinking I might try out for a house team while I'm at Hogwarts. Fred and George say all the chasers on the Gryffindor team this year are*

girls, so I might go for that. I know I could probably play seeker, too, but from what Ron writes I think you'll have that sewn up until I'm a seventh year, and I don't want to wait that long! I know I'm assuming I'll get sorted into Gryffindor, but I'm remembering what you said about the house you want to be in being the biggest factor, and hoping for the best. As long as I don't end up in Slytherin with that Malfoy git you and Ron keep writing about...

I am sorry about the scarf, by the way. Mum was really after me taking up knitting again. She says that "hand-made gifts mean so much more", but I think it also helps that yarn is pretty inexpensive when you buy in bulk. She wanted me to make at least one gift this year, and I know that at least you won't tease me about it too much. It also helps that Mum won't nag you to wear it to spare my feelings. Like that would bother me. Stupid knitting.

Anyway, the camp is pretty spartan and cold unless you're right next to a fire. I've already promised myself a hot bath when we get home, and soaking until my skin peels off. The other dragon handlers are pretty neat as well. They're all as mad about dragons as my brother, which is probably a good thing as they are out here in the middle of an ice-covered mountain range with nothing else to do...

Speaking of which, Charlie is heading over now to take us to one of the enclosures. They think one of the eggs may hatch today and we want to see that if we can! So I'll wrap this up and wish you a Happy New Year, Harry!

Your friend,

-Ginny

PS - I got mum to make a copy of the picture we took for Bill. If you can't guess, I'm the smallish lump on the right.

Harry looked at the Wizarding photograph that the letter was folded around. It showed Arthur, Molly, and Ginny lined up and waving, with what looked like a slumbering dragon curled up behind them. The adult Weasleys were wearing bulky robes lined with fur. Ginny on the other hand, seemed to be engulfed in at least three layers of bulky jumpers over a snowsuit, with a heavy cloak thrown on over that. He



could just make out her shining brown eyes and a flash of brilliant red hair sticking out the hood of her cloak.

He carefully leaned the photo up against his clock and pulled out his current letter in progress. It looked like he needed to add another paragraph or two.

*Ginny, I think your Mum was right about one thing. That sweater and scarf are pretty much the nicest Christmas presents I've ever received. I'm not going to tease you about the scarf; I'm going to bloody well wear it! It's warm, I like the colours, and no one can ever properly see the edge of a scarf unless it's folded in a drawer anyway. I'm going to send your mum a thank you note, but I wanted you to know that you two have made this one of the best Christmases ever!*

*By the way, Hogwarts in the winter might be able to give Romania a run for its money. That's another reason why knitted gifts are especially welcome. Your mum went to Hogwarts, didn't she? I bet she remembers...*

Harry concentrated on his letter, and tried not to think about Ginny sitting in a hot bath. His mind kept conjuring images of an older Ginny, and thoughts that an eleven year old boy should not be having about a ten year old girl.

Harry and Ron were a little reluctant to give up their sparring area in the common room, but they were still happy to see Neville and Hermione return. Harry frowned when they walked into the Great Hall for dinner, having just arrived from the Hogwarts Express. Neville's left eye was a little puffy, and Hermione's hair was all askew. At the same time, both were smiling, as if at some shared joke.

For the first time in recent memory, Ron ignored the serving platters that filled before him. "All right, what happened?"

"Nothing too extraordinary, Ron," Hermione said airily.

"Well..." Neville began, looking over at Hermione. She rolled her eyes but nodded. "We heard from some Hufflepuffs that Malfoy knew we were on the train and was looking for us, along with Crabbe, Goyle, Pansy, and some others. So we were able to avoid them."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "But?"

Neville ducked his head and smiled. "We did run into Blaise Zabini and Millicent Bulstrode in the last compartment," he said.

Harry and Ron looked at each other. "And?" Ron prompted.

"We were too close when the door opened to use wands, you know. Blaise tried to grab me, so I, uh, used a hip-throw on him and he hit the floor pretty hard. Millicent hit me, but then Hermione got her in a choke hold. She calmed down after that," Neville said as he and Hermione looked at each other with some embarrassment.

Harry looked over at Ron with a sigh.

"I'd have paid good money to see that," Ron said disgustedly.

"They're still in the infirmary," Hermione said. "Blaise' nose wouldn't stop bleeding, and Millicent ended up with a big scrape along one side of her face."

"...and you're not missing dinner in detention because?"

"Because there wasn't a staff member there, Ronald," Hermione snapped. "And neither one of the people in the hospital wing want to talk about how they were injured."

"I suppose they were embarrassed to get surprised by people like us," Neville said quietly, frowning down at his plate.

"Consider it a tactical advantage, Nev," Harry said smiling. "How did you like the look on Zabini's face?"

Neville Longbottom's answering grin was just a tad feral.

After dinner they all went up to the empty boys dormitory and caught up on what had happened. Harry was hesitant to say anything to Neville about the picture, but when the round-faced boy saw that Harry had hung it on the wall next to his bed, he smiled happily.

Hermione's eyes got wide when Harry showed her the invisibility cloak, but that was nothing compared to the news that Harry was pillaging the Restricted Section. Harry could tell she was troubled by what he was doing, but she didn't once threaten to go to a teacher about it. Harry suspected that venomous encounter with Snape where he threatened to snap her wand was the reason; she'd started to develop a healthy distrust for authority. This was actually a relief to some extent. Harry knew her path might be harder for her in some ways; her being associated with him was creating greater friction with a professor she'd always urged Harry to make peace with. On the other hand, he remembered how horrified and ashamed she'd been after Snape proved her wrong, murdering the headmaster.

Of course, if Harry was raiding the restricted section, then Hermione wanted in on it as well. Soon Harry was smuggling the non-trapped books to her as well. He urged her to only read them in her dormitory though. The odds of Lavender Brown or Parvati Patil recognizing Hermione's book du jour as being forbidden to students was admittedly pretty minor. Harry likewise did a lot of his reading in his bed. That also might help dispel some of the talk about his sleeping habits. Harry had forgotten how efficient the Hogwarts gossip network was, and at times it made him a little nervous.

During their first morning run together, Harry could tell that Hermione and Neville had definitely been keeping up during holidays. Neville appeared, to Harry's untrained eye, to have lost a little weight. The boy had never really been fat, mind you, but just a little on the round side. Hermione's parents had even bought her a smart looking track suit for Christmas.

"They said they were glad to see me taking steps to keep fit," she said blushing when Ron asked her about it. "My father kept going on about that whole healthy body, healthy mind thing until I asked if I could return to school early."

After they got their blood moving, they paired off on the brittle dead grass near the castle walls. They were on the leeward side, so there was almost no snow on the ground to make them slip. Harry was sparring with Hermione when she did something unexpected. He was partway through a punching combination when she seized his wrist

and twisted it, bending it in an odd direction. The next thing Harry knew, he was down on one knee with his arm bent behind him. Ron froze in disbelief and Neville's fist knocked the wind out of him before the other boy stopped as well.

Harry looked at Hermione after she let him up. "I see you read my present before you sent it to me," he teased.

"Yes, well, I was curious," she said, a little flustered at being caught out. "I read on the back cover that Aikido was more skill than strength. I'm not physically as strong as you three, and the disparity is only going to increase as we get older."

Ron shook his head. "Hermione's the only person I know who'll use 'disparity' in casual conversation."

She spun toward Ron, opening her mouth, but shut it when she saw him grinning. She settled for crossing her arms.

"That's not a bad point Hermione," Harry said thoughtfully, ignoring the by play. "I was planning to mix in a little from different things. I'd suggest practicing some of everything, because you may need it at some point. However, when you spar you should stick to the things that work for you. I'll just have to make sure I don't overextend my punches and make it easy for you."

Harry settled back into a guard position and they went back to work.

Things settled into a bit of a routine again. Potions was horrid, though the mental jabs from Snape had abated. It appeared the headmaster had a few words with the professor, because he wasn't constantly trying to batter his way into Harry's mind. The few attempts he did make were much subtler. Harry still had to be on his guard, but he didn't miss meals due to migraines anymore.

Quidditch practice had resumed three nights a week. Gred and Forge, as they had nicknamed themselves after receiving their Weasley jumpers, were still making a go of knocking Harry off his broom. They were getting better, and scored some glancing hits, until Oliver insisted that Harry wear a cap with a Bludger-repelling charm on it. Such equipment was illegal for actual matches, but it ensured that the

twins wouldn't 'crack our seeker's skull playing at being pranksters on the pitch'. Harry was quietly impressed. The twins must be getting good, because Oliver had never suggested protective gear for Harry in practices before.

Malfoy and company were also laying low. The Slytherins avoided Harry, and would only occasionally make cutting remarks to his friends when he wasn't around. Harry wondered if someone had watched a few of their morning practices, but he wasn't going to question their good fortune. He didn't want things with Draco to get out of hand too quickly, as he wasn't keen to give up his biggest advantage.

By the second week of February, Harry's surreptitious survey of the Restricted Section was complete. Unfortunately, his results were disappointing. Almost none of the books that applied to his situation were written as anything more than a theoretical exercise. Those that weren't all claimed conflicting things. One book stated emphatically that the first time Harry attempted to change a single thing, he would be forcibly ejected from the time stream, doomed to float through limbo forever. Since Harry didn't feel like he was currently doing the ethereal back stroke, he felt it was safe to discard that guide.

The books he brought back for Hermione covered a wider variety of topics. Harry was very careful not to let her see the books he was reading. He didn't want her making any educated guesses until she could block Snape out of her memories. Her survey of so-called wandless magic was by necessity fairly broad. There were magical cultures around the world, and only a few used wands to focus their magic. For example, some Asian magicians used complicated hand gestures, called seals, to focus their magic. From what Hermione whispered to them in the common room, the gestures created temporary magical energy fields for the wizard, or Wu Jen as they were called, to channel their magic through. The process was slower than using a wand, except for the simplest spells. On the other hand, it also meant that you couldn't disable an Asian Sorcerer with a simple disarming spell.

"For some reason," she concluded, "almost every system of magic has some sort of focus required to actually make the magic work, be

it wands for us, or gestures, or the invoking of spirits for some shamanic cultures. Nobody just does magic without some preparations.”

“Maybe it’s like having a safety on a gun,” Harry mused. He saw the blank looks from Ron and Neville and elaborated. “If I could cast a cutting charm by just saying ‘Diffindo’ and no wand was required, how often would we be hexing each other when we’re having a simple conversation? Maybe the wand acts like a way of controlling whether the magic is intentionally invoked.”

“So, you’re saying that we use wands because we want to... because we need to?” Hermione said thoughtfully.

“That makes sense,” Ron agreed. “If you had a group of people who just did magic whenever they thought about it, they’d hex each other out of existence the first time they got into a row.”

Everyone stared at Ron, making his ears go pink. “Ronald, I think you’re absolutely right!” Hermione said, smiling. His ears went to brick red and he looked down at his hands.

Harry decided it was time to get everyone back on topic. “Maybe the solution isn’t so much to look for an entire system of wand-less magic. Maybe we need to figure out if there are specific branches of magic that don’t require a wand,” he said with a frown. “Ones that can cause splitting headaches,” he added.

“Very well,” Hermione agreed, “give me a day and I’ll get you another list of topics.”

“Thanks Hermione,” Harry said.

She waved it off. “This is really interesting. More than our homework, anyway.”

Harry had to agree. Between Hermione not having to nag quite as much, and Harry’s memories of the material he’d already learned, the four of them were doing quite well in their classes. Harry had forgotten how light the workload was compared to fifth year OWL preparation, or his last year of school when he was gearing up for his

NEWTs. He supposed they took it easy on the first years because a lot of them were having to make a big adjustment to school life, or even being away from home for the first time.

At first, Harry was worried about standing out too much in his class work... but Hermione still managed to beat him, her raw intelligence winning out over his memories. She also was a much better organized essay writer. With both of them excelling, Ron and Neville also felt compelled to put a lot more effort into their studies. It wasn't uncommon for the four of them to take the top four scores in their exams.

Pointing out that Malfoy obviously knew summoning charms, something not taught to first year students, also motivated them to work harder. Harry figured all those cheap shots at Ron's family could be put to some use, after all.

Valentine's Day passed without comment from his friends, aside from amusement at the antics of the older students. Harry was just relieved he wouldn't have to face the horror of Madam Puddifoot's for a few years yet.

For some reason, Snape did not volunteer to referee the Gryffindor/Hufflepuff match this time around. Harry was relieved, but the Lions still marched out onto the field like a team with something to prove.

And prove it they did. The Hufflepuff chasers were utterly destroyed by the twins, and managed only two shots on goal. Oliver blocked both attempts, and Harry caught the snitch after less than ten minutes of play. The 'Puffs were shut out, two hundred thirty to zero.

As the stands emptied out onto the field, Harry was as happy as he'd been since he left the future.

After the match, Harry used his cloak to shadow Snape as he left the castle to talk to Quirrell. Hearing their conversation again, Harry was relieved. Snape was still on Dumbledore's side, at least as far as the Stone was concerned. He'd been a little concerned that the small changes he was making might have affected that.

That was reassuring, because Harry also had a few other things to worry about. When he saw Hagrid in the library, he crept up behind the huge man and looked over his elbow.

*"Dragon Breeding for Pleasure and Profit?"* Harry whispered, making Hagrid jump.

"Blimey, y' startled me, 'Arry!" the groundskeeper said, shutting the book and hiding it under the palm of his platter-sized hand.

"Why are you reading that book, Hagrid?" Harry asked in a worried voice.

"Well, can't I just be wantin' some light readin' t' do?"

"Hagrid, this is the first time I've seen you in the library."

"Can't get nothin' past y' can I?" Hagrid mumbled. "Tell yer what, come down t' my hut after lunch, all righ'?"

Harry nodded and went back to the common room, mind racing. *Do I change this up early or late?* Once he gathered his friends in the corner, he let them know what he'd seen Hagrid reading. "I think he's gone and done something foolish," Harry concluded.

"We still need to help him, if we can," Hermione fretted. Neville and Ron nodded agreement.

They slipped out of the castle after the noon meal. Harry looked over his shoulder frequently. It would be just his luck that they'd get tailed on this trip instead of the next one.

Hagrid proudly showed him the egg incubating in the heat of a roaring fire. He was just as oblivious to the concerns Harry and his friends raised as the last time around. Finally, they left the stifling hut to get some fresh air and make their way back for afternoon classes.

That evening they sat together in the common room working on their transfiguration homework. It was slower going than usual because they were also concerned with another issue.



Harry sighed and leaned back in his chair. "If that egg actually hatches a dragon, how fast do they grow?" he whispered.

Neville frowned. "I think it's pretty fast. My Uncle Algie said something once about how his trellis roses were growing faster than a dragon hatchling."

Harry grimaced. "Great. That means in no time at all it'll be bigger than Hagrid's whole hut. What the heck do you do with a dragon anyway?"

Ron shrugged. "Mostly they are kept on magical reservations as an endangered species." Suddenly he sat bolt upright in his chair. "I wonder if Charlie can help. He works at a reserve. If Hagrid can't keep the dragon here..."

"That's a great idea," Harry said.

"I don't know," Hermione said dubiously. "Did you see the way Hagrid's eyes were lit up? I'm not sure he'll agree to it."

"I think if we tell him it's Charlie, he'll feel better. They were great friends when Charlie was here at Hogwarts, and they're both barmy about dragons."

"We can always ask him," Harry suggested diplomatically.

When Hagrid sent word that the egg was soon to hatch, Harry took a few precautions. He'd taken to carrying the invisibility cloak rolled up in a corner of his bag. While his friends headed toward the hut, Harry ducked into an empty classroom and put on the cloak.

He trailed behind his friends at a distance, waiting to see if anyone followed them. Sure enough, a dark-cloaked figure left the school following his friends at a distance. Harry shadowed the pursuer, trying to figure out who was stalking them. *Looks too tall to be Malfoy. Has he got the older students helping him now?*

When the figure pulled out a wand, pointed in his friends' direction, Harry didn't hesitate. "*Stupefy!*" he whispered. The jet of red light

caught his target squarely in the middle of its back and knocking it to the ground.

Harry eased forward toward the prone figure. He walked silently, with a feline grace that seemed drastically out of place on his younger self. Wand at the ready, he used a stick to ease back the hood of the cloak. Harry inhaled sharply when he saw the hated features of his potions teacher.

Thinking quickly, he levitated the unconscious man behind a tree, out of sight from the path. He then stunned him again to make sure he stayed unconscious for several hours. *Well, he can't do anything overt without proof, can he?*

"*Obliviate!*" he said and a beam of greyish light struck the unconscious professor in the forehead. Memory charms were tricky things, and Harry was loath to use them. Fortunately, all he wanted to do was erase the last twenty minutes or so, and that was probably the easiest application of the spell.

He left the professor sitting on the ground, propped up against the tree. He was tempted to do more, but restrained himself. If there was no proof of who had stunned him, then he'd be hesitant to take action and possibly make a fool of himself. *Perhaps he'll catch a bad cold,* Harry mused vindictively.

Harry ran to the hut and just barely arrived before the hatching. Harry stared at the hatchling and remembered all the damage Norbert and Charlie had done during the war. The second-oldest Weasley son had ridden the Norwegian Ridgeback to England after learning his little sister had been killed at Hogwarts. The ministry had all but collapsed at this point, but the reign of terror the two had committed against known Death Eater holdings was the stuff of legend. It had taken Voldemort himself to kill them, but not before they tore a bloody swath through his forces. Harry always suspected that Norbert remembered more of his 'mommy' than they suspected.

Before they left, Harry used some sticking charms to ensure that the curtains fit securely together. After all that, he didn't want Malfoy or anyone else being able to peek inside.

It took a week, during which the hatchling tripled in size, before Hagrid would agree about contacting Charlie. Harry was just happy that Hagrid had named it Norbert again. Those little synchronicities were almost comforting, in an odd way.

Harry had a feeling he'd guessed correctly about the Obliviate, and the memories of him seeing the students leave the castle had been deleted as well. With no memory of his decision to follow them, there was no logical reason for Snape to suspect Harry. Harry purposefully didn't say anything to his friends about the professor following them, because their minds were still open to his Legilimency. In the end, the man was only his normally horrible self.

The night Charlie's friends were to take Norbert, Harry felt a sense of impending disaster. The first time around, they'd been caught and lost one hundred and fifty points from Gryffindor. Not forgetting the Invisibility Cloak when they left the roof would probably help, but Harry wanted something more solid than that.

In the end he sought out something a bit less than solid. Namely Peeves.

Harry found the poltergeist turning all the desks upside down in an empty classroom on the second floor. The translucent little man started toward Harry but stopped when Harry held up his hand.

"I have a little business proposition..." he began, and Peeves' expression grew crafty.

In the end, Harry agreed to supply Peeves with an entire case of Dungbombs, which would pretty much empty his money pouch after Fred and George's next Hogsmeade visit.

Lugging Norbert's crate up to the top of the Astronomy tower was just as back-breaking as Harry remembered. The morning exercises helped, but he still knew he'd be sore in the morning. It also helped that Neville accompanied him this time, volunteering after Ron had been bitten. He was noticeably stronger than Hermione was, and Harry had a feeling he'd give Ron a run for his money when they both got older.

Charlie's friends showed up right at midnight to collect their charge—a quartet of wizards with a jerry-rigged harness running between their brooms. They seemed awfully cheerful to Harry, given that what they were doing was highly illegal. He wondered if they planned to disillusion themselves once they flew past the wards. No sooner had Harry settled the cloak around himself and Neville than a horrible racket started up from the Divination tower.

"Twelve oh five, right on the dot," Harry murmured as they made their way down the stairs.

"What's that mean?" Neville whispered.

"Bribed Peeves to make a diversion for us, in case someone saw the brooms," Harry whispered in reply.

"Oh."

Harry dropped onto his bed with a sigh of relief. Neville also groaned as he lay down.

"I don't want to know what the two of you were up to," Seamus' voice echoed from his bed.

"I could tell you, but then I'd have to kill you," Harry replied. Seamus let out a squawk, but Dean just laughed and the Muggle-born student explained the joke to his friend.

A/N

Well, a bit delayed, but this is my largest update yet!

Yes, I know Dean isn't really muggle-born, but neither he nor Harry know that, and this story is told from Harry's point of view.

Now, on to the comments!

Yes, the Chamber of Secrets will play a role in what is to come... but Harry has a lot of work to do before then!

I'm trying a row of X's for scene breaks. JKR just skips a couple of lines to show a shift break in the middle of a chapter, but sometimes those don't upload well. If the X's don't work, I'll keep experimenting.

Yes, the chapters in Book One are about twenty pages, but page size, margin size, and font all impact how much text is actually on a page.

I'm working on this every day, but if I don't have a respectable amount built up, I'll hold off posting it. Folks seem to have issues with small updates, in my experience.

Yep, Harry getting creamed by the Troll shows that forewarned means fore-armed... it doesn't mean omnipotent. And when he starts really interfering, he throws everything open to chance again.

We'll see soon how Harry and company handle the stone.

Luna in Gryffindor is about the only way Harry could think of to protect her from being hazed. He hasn't forgotten what she said to him after Sirius died... that was one of the more significant discussions he'd had that year, and seemed to actually give him some peace.

Harry thought Hermione looked beautiful when he realized she wasn't dead and he hadn't lost of his best friends.

This story will definitely continue past first year. Give me some time-- I started this about a week ago, people! (grin)

I think some questions about solving mysteries and stopping Snape's 'mind-raping' were addressed in this chapter.

Thanks for the suggestions about updating my summary. I've done so, but it appears that there is a very limited number of characters you can have, because mine displays cut off half-way. Has anyone ever run into this before when posting a story?

I'm differentiating here between intelligence and raw magical power, as there are canon characters that seem to display varying amounts of each.

While brooms are indeed charmed to fly, there are some characteristics of the user that affect their performance. Otherwise, during the flying lesson, everyone's broom should have responded the same way. Instead, Hermione's just turned over and Harry's jumped into his hand at once. So I stand by my assertion that Ginny being able to fly an adult broom at age six is an indication of exceptional (or at least above-average) ability.

My muse is wearing a set of boxing gloves right now, and chewing a cigar. I don't think I'm going to have much trouble continuing to work on this a while...

"Old-Young" is a good way to describe Harry. Remember his soul was not replaced... they merged.

Sacking Snape is addressed in this chapter. I know from corporate America that doing a job search is not an overnight process. If McGonagall came back in two days I'd be a little suspicious about how hard she tried... (unless, say, only two people in Britain are qualified...)

Harry is getting a little paranoid about Fate right now. It could all just be random chance, but can he risk it?

The life debt is sort of an interesting issue. Snape repudiates it later in the series, claiming that Sirius set him up and James only stopped him to avoid getting in trouble. Technically, in canon Hermione is the one that stopped Quirrell's broom jinx during the Quidditch match.

Merged Harry is more mature in some way, but is still way fragile. His PTSD has never been treated, though some of what he's doing now may help his issues. But these unwanted recollections (like when he saw Norbert for the first time) and nightmares are wearing him down.

If you see another time-traveling fic like this, please email me the link. I've only seen a couple so far (see previous notes).

I would only consider shelving this project if I get offered a contract to revise one of my novels I've submitted for publication. That is both unlikely (been collecting rejection letters) and would still only be temporary. Abandoned stories kind of irk me as well...

In HBP, as I read it, Harry didn't dump Ginny because it was a 'quick fling'. He was intentionally putting it "on hold" so as to not make her a target for the Death Nibblers.

Yes there are experience differences here... though merged Harry isn't any more 30 than he is really 11. (Also, he pretty much had no psychosocial development after age 17.) And if Harry made Ginny wait for him for several years in the original timeline, then he should be willing to wait for her on the new timeline. He has proven to a bit of a maturing influence on his friends already. (Less embarrassment and bickering at least...)

Emotional issues aside... How would Harry in an eleven year old body go about hooking up with an older woman?

Thanks for the questions! You folks raise some good issues, from quantum mechanics to psychological disorders and everywhere in between.

When I finish a difficult scene and my brain aches, I'll often take a break to check my stats and look for new reviews. The kind words and intriguing ideas are often exactly the boost I need to launch right back into the story. So thank you all for making this so easy to write!

-Matthew

## Chapter 7

The rest of May passed much more pleasantly for Harry. Not being shunned by the school for losing a hundred and fifty points was a lot better than the last time. *Those were some of the best galleons I ever spent*, he mused as he went to transfiguration with a clear conscience and a spring in his step.

The twins eventually got the Dungbombs for Harry to give to Peeves... but only after they'd, er, weaselled the entire story out of him. Needless to say, they were impressed.

"So let me get this straight—"

"You need the Dungbombs—"

"To give to Peeves, of all things—"

"No telling what he'll use them for—"

"Too true, oh brother of mine—"

"To pay him off for trashing the Divination Tower—"

"Smashed all Trelawney's tea cups, he did--"

"So you could smuggle out a dragon—"

"That was hatched illegally by Hagrid."

"From an egg he won in a card game."

Harry looked thoughtful and then nodded. "That about sums it up."

Gred and Forge looked at each other and then leaned forward, peering closely at Harry.

"No signs of dye."

"Even the roots are black."

They leaned even closer.



“Not a freckle in sight.”

“Cosmetic charms?”

“Wouldn’t hold up for a whole Quidditch practice.”

“Too true, Angelina told me that once.”

They looked at each other and nodded again.

“Right Harrikins, what colour was your mum’s hair?”

“Er, a sort of auburn,” Harry replied, wondering where this was going.

“Well, it couldn’t have been his mum what strayed--”

“Not with all that black hair of his.”

“And it couldn’t be our mum—”

“Because she was occupied with ickle Ronnikins.”

“Would you care to explain what you’re talking about,” Harry asked coldly. “While you still can?”

“Well, we’re trying to figure out—”

“Because it seems impossible to me—”

“How they went and got a Weasley—”

“With black hair?”

Harry looked from one twin to the other and then burst out laughing.

With Hagrid’s crisis abated, Hermione rededicated herself to her study project. She didn’t tell them precisely what she was pursuing; perhaps realizing that Harry’s reticence might be for a reason.

Of course it was too good to last.

Harry had just slipped into the restricted section and replaced *Moste Obscure Enchantments* on the shelves when he heard a voice behind him.

“Back again, Harry?”

Harry twitched under the cloak. He turned slowly to see Professor Dumbledore running a long finger down one of the dusty shelves.

“There is a certain allure, I suppose, to forbidden knowledge. But there is a reason that we have a restricted section. Much of this is dangerous, Harry, both for you... or for your friends.”

*He knows, dammit!* Harry fumed while trying to maintain a steady expression. He let the hood fall back and tried not to look too guilty. *He said friends too... Snape might have recognized a title from Hermione's memories. That means he's still probing her, the bastard.* He fanned the flames of anger. Anger was easier to manage, and more useful for this confrontation. “Well, what did you expect me to use this for?” he asked, gesturing with a flap of the invisibility cloak. “Tormenting Mrs. Norris?”

Only someone who spent hours at a time talking to an animated portrait of the headmaster would catch the flicker of surprise. The headmaster smiled benignly. “That’s an interesting assumption.”

“Not particularly,” Harry said coolly. “The note said they got the cloak from my father. Given when he died, that would mean someone who was at Hogwarts the same time he was. Professor McGonagall was his head of house, but you know how she is about rules, and she’d never go behind your back. Hagrid was a friend, but bless his soul he can’t keep a secret.” Harry kicked himself about not appearing too knowledgeable. “Professor Snape was in the same year as my father, but I can’t imagine him not keeping it,” he added.

Dumbledore nodded. “Not an unlikely bit of reasoning. But I will admit I did not expect you to abuse a family heirloom in this fashion. There are dangerous books here, Harry, ones that are kept out of the hands of students for a reason,” he said sagely.

“Funny, I always thought knowledge wasn’t evil. Rather, it was how it was used that could be evil... He’s still doing it, you know. Snape.”

“Professor Snape, Harry,” Dumbledore corrected automatically, “and he assures me that he is not doing anything harmful to you or any other students.”

Harry shook his head. “He’s being more subtle with whatever it is he’s doing, but I can still feel... well, something. If you want to just tell me what it is, we can save everyone a lot of time.”

The headmaster’s blue eyes were still twinkling, but his eyebrows lowered a fraction. “Harry, I’m sorry, but I cannot allow you to dictate terms. You must accept that Professor Snape has my utmost confidence, and that nothing is being done that is against your own best interest. You should probably return to your dormitory before Mr. Filch catches you out.”

Harry stared into the headmaster’s eyes, daring him to test his Occlumency again. The old man did not take to the bait however, for which Harry was actually a little glad. Outwardly, he just shrugged. “Maybe Beauxbatons doesn’t get as cold in the winter,” he said as he pulled his hood up and left.

Harry ground his teeth all the way back to the Gryffindor common room. He removed the cloak just out of sight of the Fat Lady’s portrait. When he walked in, Hermione was the only one of his friends still up. She sat on one of the couches with her bag open next to her and her transfiguration book in her lap.

She looked up expectantly as he sat down. “Did you find it?” she asked in a low voice.

Harry shook his head. “Dumbledore was there waiting for me. He knows, Hermione. And he knew you were involved.”

She blanched and swallowed. “But Harry, I haven’t told anyone about this!”

Harry looked thoughtful. “Are you sure, Hermione?”

She nodded her eyes wide. Harry noticed her lower lip was trembling.

Harry snorted. "Don't worry, of course I believe you. I'm just trying to figure out how they found out, that's all. You haven't written anything down have you?"

"No, just the lists I gave you," she said with concern.

"And I burned those afterward."

Hermione stared off into space, completely motionless. Harry held his breath. "Do you suppose..." she began, her voice trailing off. She frowned and looked directly at Harry. "Maybe those headaches you got.... Do you think he might have been trying to read your mind or something? I've read about people doing that in books, though usually it's an alien or something, though I suppose Professor Snape acts a bit like one. Maybe he's doing it to me, only I don't feel it. Oh no!"

Harry had to fight to keep an elated grin off his face and look properly shocked. She'd worked it out on her own, from just a few clues, most of which were supplied by Snape and Dumbledore themselves. However, she didn't look triumphant; rather she looked like she wanted to cry.

"What's wrong?" Harry asked, concerned.

"But Harry, that means I did betray you then," Hermione wailed. "He must have read it out of my mind. That's the only explanation that fits all the facts. He... he was inside my mind." She shuddered. "That awful man!" she snapped.

"Hermione, that is in no way, shape, or form, your fault," Harry said firmly. "I think we now have an extra summer project... just try not to think too much about it until we leave, okay?"

Hermione nodded silently. She leaned forward suddenly and gave Harry a quick hug around the neck. Then she jumped up off the couch and bolted up the stairs to the girls' dormitory.

Harry sat on the couch, a little flustered. He didn't think she meant anything by that-- she'd always been affectionate, at least with him. And she'd also had a rather nasty shock herself. It was still the first real hug of any sort he'd had in this timeline, at least since his parents were alive.

With that cheerful thought to keep him company, Harry climbed the stairs to his dormitory and his latest letter. He was especially late getting to sleep that night, and barely awoke in time for the morning run.

After that discussion though, Harry knew he had to distract attention from Hermione, at least until summer holiday. Every time he walked into the potions lab, he would deliberately fracture his Occlumency shields. Instead of visualizing a smooth expanse of seamless metal, he let them become rusted and buckled in places, as if they were worn out or collapsing under some horrific strain. Those subtle probings from Snape were suddenly multiplied once he was no longer immediately rebuffed. Harry also deliberately stoked his fury at the man who tried so hard to make his life a living hell. This ensured that when he did pry at the gaps in Harry's mental defences, the potions teacher would get little more than jumbled images and an extremely unpleasant emotional backlash.

Sure enough, Snape took the bait and would constantly be working on Harry's shields from beginning of class to the end. Harry was actually relieved to feel the greasy git constantly trying to get into his mind. The ghost of pain radiating from his scar was another thing entirely though. That could only be Voldemort's anticipation building.

With the groundwork laid for Hermione discovering Legilimency, Harry could focus on the end of term. His friends were concerned about doing well on their exams, but Harry was also thinking about his confrontation with Quirrell.

Harry personally had no grudge against the young professor. He was just another victim of Voldemort. But Harry also knew the man's fate was sealed. Once he stopped resisting Voldemort's possession, once the man's evil had seeped into his body and soul, removing it would kill him instantly. The man was really dead the moment he'd been

taken. Harry's nemesis had just been wearing him since then, like an old coat.

Hermione set up a study schedule for them, and Harry was pleased to see no one winding her up about it, even Ron. The bushy-headed witch had a little more confidence than before, perhaps from her friends, perhaps from the martial arts. Either way, she wasn't quite as hysterical about their grades, and didn't try to be such a taskmaster for their study group.

Harry felt a little odd as his friends sat in the sun near the lake after their History of Magic examination. He was going to face Voldemort that night, when he made his attempt on the Sorcerer's Stone. He was fairly confident, but anything could happen. Anything could go wrong. This might be his last chance to see his friends, and he felt a little disconnected from it all. He was glad that he'd timed it so he wasn't sending off a letter to Ginny today; the risk was too high that he'd let something slip to her, something he couldn't let her know yet. As much as he was dreading having to reveal everything to his friends, all his manipulations and deceit, not having anyone to talk to was even worse. He just hoped they'd be willing to talk to him after they knew the truth.

"All right, Harry?" Neville's voice shook Harry out of his reverie.

Harry looked up at his friend's concerned face. He rubbed at the scar on his forehead. "It's been hurting a bit lately. Probably just stress."

Ron and Hermione broke off their conversation and looked over at Harry.

"I'm fine," he said irritably. "I'm just worn out and I feel like something odd is going on around here."

"At Hogwarts, mate? Who'd have thunk it?" Ron said with a grin.

Harry chuckled and they lay back on the warm grass and talked about their summer plans.

"My Gran is talking about getting the greenhouse fixed up this summer," Neville informed them, but then he frowned, "if my Herbology marks are high enough, that is."

"Neville, you were practically tutoring us all in Herbology this year," Hermione reminded him.

"She's right, mate," Ron agreed. "Don't think we're doing anything special at The Burrow, though Bill may come up to visit for a bit. What about you, Hermione?"

"My parents usually take me on holiday to the continent. It's only for a couple of weeks. I expect I'll stay busy though." She glanced at Harry.

Harry knew what she'd be doing. He'd already sent a letter to Flourish and Blotts adding a large number of galleons to her tab there.

"What about you, Harry?" Neville asked curiously.

Harry shrugged. "Same old mess. Cooking, cleaning, and gardening for the Dursleys."

Ron scowled. "I'll talk to Mum. You should be able to stay over for a couple of weeks. All of you."

"Ron, are you sure it won't be an imposition?" Hermione asked.

"Nah, not as long as I ask first. Bill and Charlie had friends over all the time when they were in school. Lee Jordan spent half of last summer with the twins. It's not a big deal," Ron said, replying to Hermione, but he was looking toward Harry the whole time.

"I'll see if I can get permission," Harry said resignedly. "Just send me an owl when you know." *Hopefully I can find a way to keep Dobby out of my mail this time.*

When they finally got up to head in for dinner, Harry felt strangely invigorated. He was soon to confront the madman that murdered his parents, and by the way also wanted him dead as well, but still he was at peace.

Harry had several advantages, including what he hoped was total surprise. Unfortunately, with the Horcruxes still out there, it would be impossible to do more than force Voldemort to abandon his current host. Saving the stone would have to be enough for now. At this juncture, Harry had a lot more to lose than his enemy.

Afterwards, Harry would have been hard put to recall anything he'd eaten that night. Instead, he remembered looking at his friends and wondering if he'd ever see them again. He put away his morbid thoughts as they made their way back to the Gryffindor tower, Ron and Neville talking about the upcoming match against Ravenclaw.

Begging off with a headache and rubbing at his scar, Harry went to bed early. Once under the canopy, he wrapped the invisibility cloak around himself and crept back out the portrait hole again. Harry hurried as much as he could, dodging around the last couple of students that were heading back to their rooms. He'd prefer to confront Quirrell early on, rather than having to fight through the puzzles to follow the Defence professor.

His luck held until he hit the third floor staircase and ran into Peeves.

"Who's there?" the poltergeist cackled. "Know you're there, even if I can't see you. Are you a ghoulie, ghostie, or wee student beastie?"

"Out of my way, Peeves," Harry whispered fiercely. "No time to play. And no matter what you do, don't tell Professor Dumbledore I'm here! Tell anyone else if you like, but not him!"

"Well since you asked so nicely, that's exactly what I'll do!" Peeves' wicked black eyes sparkled and then he was hurling down the hallway. "Gots a message for Dumbly-Door! Yes Peeves does! Going to tell him right off!" Maniacal laughter trailed off down the hallway.

Harry knew that Dumbledore had been called away by the ministry – which was why Quirrell chose this night. Peeves would hopefully be side-tracked until this was all over.

He approached the door to Fluffy's room, which was standing ajar, just as the last strains of harp music died away. A robed figure was



reaching for the trapdoor just as Harry sent a stinging hex into the three-headed dog's haunch.

Three pairs of very angry eyes popped open and the massive dog pounced with a blood-curdling snarl. In a thrice, Quirrell was picked up and hurled bodily into the wall, bleeding from multiple bites on his arms and torso.

He didn't drop his wand however, and an instant later a high-pitched voice shrieked "*Stupefy!*" The red ray of light threw Fluffy back and the massive dog crumpled up at the base of the opposite wall.

"*Expelliarmus!*" Harry's spell was an instant later, and Quirrell, caught off guard, stared in shock as his wand flew through the air toward the seemingly empty doorway. Harry reached out and caught the wand out of the air, letting the cloak fall back.

"Potter," Quirrell gasped sitting up. "No!" a higher pitched voice snarled.

"Tom, you didn't think the headmaster would just simply leave, did you? Not when that might present a... temptation to the less trustworthy staff members," Harry said coolly.

"He knew?" Quirrell whispered. His already pale skin was becoming like milk now, and his wounds bled freely.

Harry knew the man was not long for this world; his misinformation was intended for Voldemort's ears. "The moment you returned, Quirinus. He just couldn't find anyone to take your place at that point. You can thank your master for that, at least," he concluded sadly.

"He can... make him bring us the stone..." Quirrell's eyes closed and he winced as the higher pitched voice rasped from the back of his turban.

Harry rocked back a step as he felt Voldemort battering at his mental defences. His scar ached abominably for an instant before he was able to shrug off the assault.

"You would... do better... to join us. Bring me... the stone, and I..."

“Sorry, old boy,” Harry said in a bored tone. He pocketed his wand and then tossed Quirrell’s over his shoulder. “You made your choice when you killed my parents.” He stepped forward. “Let’s test Mum’s handiwork, shall we?” He reached out and grabbed Quirrell’s wrist.

Harry’s knees buckled as the pain from his scar made his head feel like it was splitting open. He stayed silent though, as Quirrell shrieked. Harry stabbed out with his Legilimency and Voldemort’s shrieks joined those of his doomed minion.

Harry’s ears were near to bursting from the sound when the back of Quirrell’s turban burst asunder and the man slumped to the ground. The pain from Harry’s scar cut off instantly and he fell to his knees.

In the sudden silence, Harry could hear rapid footsteps and voices approaching. With fumbling fingers he pulled the invisibility cloak off and shoved the gossamer fabric under his robes. He was trembling, trying to climb to his feet, when Professor McGonagall stepped into the doorway and let out a choked cry.

“Hello, Professor,” Harry said as he lurched forward. “I got a really bad feeling from my scar, and I knew something was going to happen.” He blinked and shook his head. “Voldemort was in his head, but when he touched me it burned him.”

Harry was more than a little out of it, so he let McGonagall usher him to the hospital wing. Honestly, he was a little surprised he wasn’t completely knocked out like last time. He still felt horribly weak though.

He was resting on a bed when Dumbledore arrived, looking very grave.

“Harry, I’d like you to tell me why you went to the third floor corridor tonight,” he said in a very soft voice.

“Well sir, I’ve had a headache the last day or so. Not the headache I get when *Professor* Snape is doing whatever he does. This was sharper, and centred around that scar on my forehead. I tried to go to sleep after dinner, but suddenly I couldn’t. I felt compelled to... no, that isn’t the right word. I felt like something was happening and I had

to get up there. I saw Professor Quirrell trying to sneak past that huge guard dog and I knew he was up to something. When the dog woke up, it bit him and they fought. When I saw a chance I got his wand away from him... but then he started talking in two voices. There was this really odd high-pitched voice that made my scar hurt really bad. They wanted me to help them get something, a stone of some sort. But when he touched me, Professor Quirrell started screaming and then he fell down. I started feeling really weak myself, and that's when Professor McGonagall found me." Harry was trembling by the time he finished, and could only lay back on the pillows.

Professor Dumbledore stared at Harry a moment longer. "You have done a great thing, Harry," Dumbledore said gravely. "From what we can determine, Professor Quirrell was helping Voldemort. If he'd found what was guarded under that room, the consequences could have been quite severe."

"Voldemort was that other voice I heard, wasn't it?"

"Yes, Harry, it was. He has sought a means of coming fully back to life. Do not worry; the item he seeks will now be destroyed to ensure that he does not have another opportunity."

"Sir, he said something else... he said... he said he'd kill me, and no prophecy would stop him this time. Do you know what he was talking about?" Harry painfully sat up and looked the headmaster square in the eyes.

Dumbledore let out a heavy sigh. "Harry, this is not something we should discuss at this time."

"So there is a prophecy. He... it... Voldemort was very angry. This prophecy involves me, doesn't it?"

"Harry, I promise you we will discuss it when the time comes," Dumbledore said weakly.

Harry gave him a long look before settling back on the bed. "I'm going to hold you to that."

“Of that, I have little doubt, Harry.” There was no mistaking the amused undertone in the headmaster’s voice as he turned to leave.

Madam Pomfrey, who’d been waiting near the door, bustled up and began taking Harry’s temperature. He let out a sigh. “I’ll drink the nastiest potions you can lay hands on, without complaint, if I can be out of here by Saturday.”

The school nurse looked down at Harry, still holding her wand to the centre of his forehead. The corner of her mouth quirked a tiny bit. “We’ll see, Mr. Potter. You’re showing signs of severe fatigue and some dehydration. A full day’s bed-rest with plenty of fluids should do it, but we’ll have to see.”

Harry smiled weakly as she turned and walked toward her potion cabinet. He scratched at his stomach and had to hold in a sigh of relief. He could feel the slippery gossamer material of the invisibility cloak pooled under his shirt.

The sun was shining, the grass was green, and the stands surged with red and gold on one side and blue and silver on the other.

Harry was never so glad to be on his broom again.

Madam Pomfrey had only cleared him that morning. The entire Gryffindor table cheered when he made it down for a quick breakfast. Oliver let out a whoop that drew some glares from the high table, though Harry thought McGonagall looked a trifle smug.

When he sat down though, there was silence from his friends. Ron, in particular was visibly angry. Harry faltered.

“Why did you do that Harry?” Hermione asked quickly. She didn’t look very pleased with him either, but from the glances she gave Ron it looked like she wanted to head off an explosion. Even good-natured Neville looked upset.

“I thought we were your friends,” Ron whispered in a hurt voice. Harry wished he’d been yelling instead.

"I- look, I," Harry stuttered before he took a deep breath and swallowed. He'd been concentrating so much on the confrontation that he hadn't anticipated their reaction to him facing Quirrell alone. "Look, there was no logical reason to think anything was happening. I just had a bad feeling, so I put on my cloak to go check it out. When, when I saw him, at that point I knew there wasn't time to get any help. I'm sorry," he said sincerely. "I didn't mean to hurt anyone." *I may have meant to leave them out, he rationalized, but I didn't think they'd be hurt like this. I don't deserve friends like these...*

Neville sighed. "We know you didn't mean it like that, Harry. But we were all worried. We thought the Slytherins had caught you alone in the corridors again. All day Friday Madam Pomfrey wouldn't let you have any visitors."

"Oh, I didn't know that," Harry said, shaking his head a little.

"See Ron, it wasn't a personal insult," Hermione said in a coaxing tone.

Ron just let out an exasperated sigh. "How do you manage to get in trouble just sitting on your bloody bed?" he asked, though his tone was conciliatory.

"It's a gift," Harry replied, deadpan. Ron rolled his eyes at Harry as Neville chuckled and Hermione beamed. And just like that things were back to normal.

Harry didn't even object when Ron and Neville made a point of making sure they had their wands ready for the match, and grinned while they practiced the 'swish and flick' motion for *Wingardium Leviosa* as they walked out to the pitch. Harry accepted the teasing with a grin. They were determined to play safety net, given some rumours going around the school.

The locker room had been oddly quiet -- Oliver could barely speak as the team put on their gear. "This is the first time... we've had a team... even get close," the fifth year student took a deep breath, his face red with emotion.

“Don’t worry Ollie--” Harry’s breath caught. No one got away with calling him ‘Ollie’, not even the twins. He glanced over at their captain, but he hadn’t even noticed.

“We’re going—“

“To slaughter them!”

The whole team let out a bloodthirsty cheer, and Harry joined in with a will.

That seemed to jolt Oliver back to reality. “Right you lot. Davies was bragging to some of his mates that they were going to ‘blow Potter off his broom’ this match, so I want you Weasleys on him like a second shadow. Got it?”

“Ickle Harrikins—“

“is safe with us!”

Oliver nodded, and then turned to Harry. “Now, don’t let that worry you any. I’m sure-“

“All I have to do is catch the snitch, right? Piece of cake,” Harry interrupted cheekily. He did *not* want Oliver to get all motherly on him... though knowing Fred and George had his back was oddly comforting.

Oliver’s warning was spot on, however. The second Madam Hooch’s whistle blew, the Ravenclaw beaters took off at a sharp angle, heading directly toward Harry instead of the Bludgers. Harry, forewarned, leaned back and hauled upward on the handle. This resulted in him doing a nearly vertical takeoff, leaving the Ravenclaw beaters rocketing under him.

*They must want to intimidate me, he mused. If they actually hit me, they’d get called for blatching.*

Instead, the beaters were badly out of position as Alicia seized the Quaffle and passed it to Angelina. Dreadlocks trailing behind her, the

Gryffindor chaser had an almost unopposed run at the Ravenclaw hoops and scored easily.

Harry thrust his fist in the air, cheering as loudly as his friends in the stands. He'd never got to play this game the first time around, and everything was new to him.

The Ravenclaw seeker, a tall seventh-year named Kyle Frobisher was soon checking Harry as closely as he could get away with. Fred and George regularly drove him off, allowing Harry some uninterrupted moments to search for the snitch from high above the action.

During one of these intervals, Harry decided after not seeing any gold on the field, to do a little shaking up of his own. As Kyle ducked a Bludger and drew closer, the Ravenclaw chasers were starting another push toward the hoops Oliver guarded. Harry suddenly rolled onto his side and banked into a steep dive. Frobisher didn't bother looking for the snitch, he just tore after Harry.

Correctly reading the curve, the Ravenclaw seeker cut inside Harry's course and began to pull alongside his smaller opponent. Fred and George had to veer off, afraid that if they knocked a Bludger toward Frobisher, it might hit Harry instead.

Harry continued his spiralling dive, as if following an imaginary Snitch. As he tried to pull it even tighter, the centrifugal force of his turn threatened to pull him off his broom. He knew it had to be even worse for Frobisher, who was both larger and also trying to turn inside Harry's course.

Suddenly, about thirty feet above the grass, Harry jerked his broom the opposite direction and shot upwards in a graceful curve. Frobisher had just started turning his head toward Harry when he ploughed into one of the Ravenclaw chasers, sending both spinning to the ground and causing Roger Davies to frantically call for time out. Harry laughed at the "Bloody hell!" he heard from one of the twins.

A couple of minutes later, the Ravenclaw players took to the air again, to a swell of polite applause from both sides. Frobisher kept his left

arm tucked against his side, and no longer marked Harry quite as aggressively.

The injured chaser also slowed down the Ravenclaw offence, and Gryffindor was up by eighty points when the snitch made its first appearance of the afternoon.

As luck would have it, the fluttering golden ball appeared a bit closer to the Ravenclaw seeker, and both he and Harry spotted it almost simultaneously.

Harry got a good boost of speed from his dive, but he and Frobisher were still neck and neck as they tore across the pitch. Its movements entirely random once activated, the snitch was zooming the length of the pitch, its course unusually linear.

Both of them were reaching forward, inches from the golden ball, when it suddenly shot upwards and back. Harry didn't even think about what he was doing. He hooked his heels on the shaft of his trusty Nimbus Two Thousand and launched himself upwards and back. His broom continued forward, along with the gaping Ravenclaw seeker as Harry arched his back and closed his fingers around the snitch.

Suddenly Harry felt himself jerked to the side in a way that was horribly familiar.

A/N

Okay, this was a little short, but that seemed like a nice place to cut off an upload. evil grin

This site seems to still be having some issues. I can't seem my stats now, but I have not gotten any emails from the bot regarding reviews or updates on my Alert list since before the outage.

If you have an unaddressed question, I may not be able to see your review. I can also be contacted at C L A D R A N at M I N D S P R I N G dot C O M, the same address as listed in my profile.

Now, on to the comments!



JKR said that Dean's biological father was a wizard who was recruited by the Death Eaters and left his muggle wife and family to protect them. He later died at the hands of Voldemort's followers. Dean never knew, and it was a sub-plot that was dropped from either book 5.

As we can see in this update, the foundation has been set for Hermione's discover. Nice to know some things can always be counted on, eh?

As suggested, I may start tossing this onto some other sites like SIYE. I like the audience here, but there have been incidents coughbobmin357cough where stories have been deleted without reason. I'm sure I don't know the full story but no sense taking chances.

The nightmares are tough to write, since I have to get into Harry's head to do them right. I'm glad it's appreciated. grin

Is there a canonical source for the bit about purebloods losing their magical powers? I know it's a staple of Marriage Law fics (you can read "There's Always A Way" if you want to know how I feel about those), but I couldn't find anything in the books or the lexicon. I think Tom and I will just have to agree to disagree about brooms...

Regarding Snape – I don't know if he will be redeemed in Book 7 or not. JKR in interviews doesn't really portray him as 'just misunderstood' either. Snape is not Alan Rickman, folks. Harry's reasoning regarding Snape's use of legilimency and still accusing Harry of being Lockhart, Jr. is based solely on canon. Regularly 'Mindraping' your students is not an admirable practice, period. I think at best he's an opportunist, and offered his services to Dumbledore when he realized the Death Nibblers were a lot like an organized crime family.... Great fringe benefits, but a really awful retirement program.

Harry remembers a lot of the Martial Arts he learned from the American Wizarding Expeditionary force. The books were mainly purchased as cover to explain his knowledge. Also, it's likely his previous/future trainers emphasized practical aspects and sparring, so the books would be good for things like katas (forms).

I see your point about the pick-up scene, Unicorn. I went back and fleshed it out a tiny bit more. I'm a little leery of doing too much repetition though, as it tends to bore people. I just need to make sure I don't gloss over too much that happens the same way.

Snape tumbling to the illicit research was covered in this chapter. I hope you like how it played out. Ickle Harrikins is getting in touch with his 'Inner Slytherin'.

Hopefully Harry got to take some his frustrations out on Quirrell. Hopefully, he won't pay for that later...

Being a natural Occlumens may be induced by an abusive childhood. Being zapped by Voldemort at age one may be an even better explanation. Better yet, Harry can always ask Dumbledore first and put him on the spot instead.

Harry has too much to do to waste time re-solving a mystery to which he already knows the answer. He decided to "cheat like Draco in a Potions Exam". (See prologue for quote.)

I'll check that C2 archive that was suggested, but right now it's not pulling up...

Harry is NOT planning to give "The Birds & Bees Talk" to his friends. Can you imagine the psychological scarring?

All right, enough fun with the responses. Again, if a specific question about this chapter was not addressed above, please email me.

Now on to chapter eight!

-Matthew

## Chapter 8

Harry's stomach lurched and he almost let go of the snitch as he remembered the Tri-Wizards Cup and the port-key that whisked him and Cedric to Little Hangleton.

Fortunately, the jerking sensation continued as he swung forward and back. Harry realized he was being held up by the back of his Quidditch robes. He looked up and saw Fred and George grimacing as they tried to control their brooms with just their knees. Their hands were occupied by beater bats and handfuls of the back of Harry's robes.

"Did you get it—"

"-ickle Harrikins?"

Harry held up the struggling snitch, though that set him to swinging even worse.

"Right. No more—"

". . .Bludgers to block."

With that they dropped their bats and used their free hands to guide their brooms lower. When Harry was about ten feet off the ground, they let out a cheer and dropped Harry directly on top of the mass of Gryffindor students below. Harry never even made it to head level, as a dozen hands held him up above the crowd.

Oliver flew over, Harry's broom tucked under his arm, but his face was pale. He handed Harry his broom without a word and Harry quickly climbed on to join his team-mates in a flying group hug.

Eventually, the professors got the majority of the students heading back to the castle. Professor McGonagall was a little bright-eyed, and ruffled from when Oliver threw his arms around her and kissed her on the cheek... to which she only responded "Oh do get cleaned up, Mr. Wood!"

Harry was a little surprised when he found Ron, Hermione, and Neville waiting for him outside the locker room. "Oliver said no autographs," he quipped.

Ron playfully swatted him on top of his head. "Malfoy probably wants you dead right now, you know. That win put the house cup completely out of their hands."

"I'm heartbroken, Ron, really I am."

"He does have a point, Harry. This would be too good an opportunity for him to pass up," Hermione volunteered.

Ron glanced at Hermione, looking a little shocked.

Harry scratched at the back of his head, both touched and embarrassed at the same time. "Thanks," he murmured.

As they made their way back to the castle, both Neville and Ron walked with their wands out, held closely to their sides. Harry was thoughtful as he noted the obvious signs of wear. As he recalled, Neville had his father's wand and Ron was using Charlie's old one. Neither had a wand that actually chose them, which seemed to be a considerable handicap. He'd have to do something about that as well.

Walking into the Great Hall on Monday and seeing it decked out in red and gold for the end of year feast really brought it home to Harry. Dumbledore wasn't going to have to award Gryffindor a ton of points at the last minute to change the outcome. After Harry's sharp words in the restricted section, he didn't imagine the old man would be too likely to help him out anyway. But the fact that he didn't have to was what made Harry's heart lift as he took a seat with his friends.

Some things can be changed. Maybe what he was calling fate was just a coincidence after all.

It was both a scary and a liberating thought. Maybe he could make it all come out right... and maybe he could screw it up even worse. Still, he couldn't be James and Lily's son without at least trying. He smiled as he thought about the album with pictures of his parents that Hagrid had given to him earlier that day.

Thinking about his parents also reminded him of some other issues that were nagging at him. He knew he didn't dare do anything to Scabbers this early in the course of events. The rat Animagus played an essential role in the resurrection of Voldemort. If he were exposed now, he might get away and seek out his old master even sooner than he did before. Harry needed that time to prepare.

But it also meant Sirius was still cooling his heels in Azkaban.

That thought alone threatened to spoil his appetite. As Harry tried to swallow a bite of mashed potatoes, his eyes wandered up to the high table and he saw Professor Dumbledore smiling down at him.

A plan suddenly formed in Harry's mind; it wasn't guaranteed, but it was better than nothing. He smiled and resumed eating while he listened to the table chatter and worked out the details.

The next two weeks had no exams or classes, and were usually handy for the older students to complete independent research projects. Harry and his friends turned to training with a will, working out two and sometimes three times a day. In between, Hermione practically lived in the library. She was working hard on her 'summer research', and since she didn't have potions classes to attend, all she had to do was avoid Snape in the corridors.

After his morning run the day after the feast, Harry made his way to the headmaster's office. As he approached the gargoyle it slid aside on its own as the headmaster's voice bade him to enter.

"Hello Harry. Congratulations on the cup; that was quite a daring catch."

Harry looked down, wondering why the old man was trying so hard to butter him up. "Fred and George deserve most of the credit sir. In my opinion they made just as important a catch that day."

"I would be surprised if you felt otherwise. So what brings you here today? Would you like a lemon drop?"

Harry shook his head. "I wanted to talk to you... about something I was trying to look up in the restricted section. I wanted to keep it

private, but I haven't had any luck, and I think it's important..." he let his voice trail off and looked up at the headmaster.

"Harry, I really do want to help you. I know it has been hard for you in some ways, but I would like to do what I can," Dumbledore said.

Harry looked at him evenly for a moment. He really did mean well. That's what made him so hard to deal with. Once he thought he was acting for the best, he would take whatever steps were necessary. While Harry had to admire his drive, the fact that the man could also be frighteningly close-minded on certain subjects made him dangerous. His own portrait warned him of that once it was clear that Harry could not be talked out of returning to the past. Harry took a deep breath and tried to look uncomfortable. "I, well, I've been having nightmares."

"I see," the headmaster replied. His lack of reaction was not shocking. Dean and Seamus were not terribly close-mouthed, and the Hogwarts Gossip Network was frighteningly efficient. Plus all the portraits reported to the headmaster.

Harry took a deep breath. "At first the dreams were fairly short. I'd just hear some laughing and a bright green light would shine." Harry noticed the headmaster's eyebrows furrow just the tiniest bit. "N-now, I hear voices first. I think... I think I'm hearing my mum and dad... before they d-died."

"I'm very sorry to hear that Harry," the headmaster began sadly.

"It's not the fact that I'm hearing them that bothers me so much as the fact that what they are saying doesn't make any sense... I hear my father shouting 'He's here, Lils, he's here!' and then she asks 'what about the spell?' and he answers 'I don't understand, Peter was the secret keeper!'"

Harry took another shaky breath. "Then there is an explosion and sounds of fighting. Then I hear my Mum's voice one last time... Sir, what is this secret keeper they are talking about? I couldn't find any reference to it in the books we checked."

Albus Dumbledore went very still. "Harry that is a very old charm, and one not lightly used. Peter was a friend of your parents, one who died in the war."

"What charm, sir?" Harry pressed. *I've definitely shaken him up*, he thought.

"Harry, I'm afraid I'm not sure what it means. I'm going to need some time before I understand the implications of what you've told me."

Harry just nodded, struggling to contain himself. *He knows very well what I'm talking about*, he seethed.

"Harry, if you have any more dreams, or if you remember any more of that one, please let me know as soon as possible." The headmaster's voice was low as he tried to catch Harry's eye.

The boy didn't look up. Instead he sighed wearily and whispered "Yes, sir," before he turned and left.

Once he was out in the corridor, Harry clenched his fists to keep from screaming his frustration. *I've waited all this time, and this is the first opportunity I've found to clear Sirius without getting everyone else killed. And what does that old fool do? Nothing!*

The rattle of metal jerked Harry out of his thoughts. The suit of armour he'd just passed was vibrating like mad. With great effort, he pushed his anger down before he triggered another burst of accidental magic. *Maybe he will do something, maybe he just doesn't want to get my hopes up*. He took a steadying breath and began walking again. *Maybe he'll do something before I get strong enough to do something myself*.

Their final exam results were not really surprising, except perhaps to Hermione. In the end, she was happy to receive independent confirmation of her utter brilliance and finally relaxed. She sat down with Harry and helped him map out a training regimen for each of them to follow over the summer holidays. All of them found they rather liked the martial arts they'd been practicing, and a sense of friendly competition was making itself felt.

Harry was now just barely holding his own against Ron, who had a little more reach than he did. Neville and Hermione weren't far behind him either. Even the twins had joined them a few times, when they weren't busy setting up one of their elaborate pranks.

His friends' growing proficiency just complicated what he had to do next. He thought about just buying Ron and Neville new wands for their birthdays, but he knew how the Weasleys felt about charity. He wasn't sure if Neville's Gran might be even worse. A little acting might make it more palatable, though...

They always carried their wands with them while practicing. This was both to get used to them, and to avoid being caught unarmed by Malfoy or his allies. Harry kept his strapped to his forearm. Neville kept his in a breast pocket of his robes and Ron held his tucked against his forearm.

At one of their last practices the day before taking the Hogwarts Express back to London, Harry announced that he wanted to try out an escape move he'd read in a book. He had the two boys hold his arms behind his back and try to keep him there. When Harry jumped backward and twisted, his feet stumbled and he brought all three of them down in a pile. There was a loud snapping sound and everyone froze.

Harry's knee had come down on top of Ron's wand and snapped the shaft.

Harry apologized profusely as he helped the red-headed boy up. When they patted themselves down for injuries, Neville discovered that his wand had also broken in his pocket, probably when Harry landed on him. Their friend was horrified and would not stop apologizing until they let him lead them to his trunk. He had just enough in his money bag to hand each boy a stack of galleons to buy a replacement wand at Ollivander's.

After dinner that evening, Hermione hung back to walk next to Harry as the boisterous crowd made their way to the Gryffindor common room.

"That was a nice thing you did," she whispered.



"I have no idea what you're talking about," he said carefully.

"Harry, you are not that clumsy. I know a pratfall when I see one," she said quietly.

*Damn.* Harry sighed. "You know how using someone else's wand handicaps you."

"I understand it makes things harder, but they will eventually get their own wands, won't they?"

"If it were done when it is done, then it were well it were done quickly," Harry quoted, stalling for time.

Hermione looked at him. "When did you read Macbeth?"

"Er, I had to do a book report last year." *Great, I was hoping to divert her, not throw her another clue.*

They walked a little farther, but Harry could feel a pair of brown eyes boring into him. "Is this... urgent, Harry?"

"Better to be prepared, yeah?"

"I think I'm going to start on my research project the instant I get home."

"You do that," Harry said, relieved that she wasn't going to push any farther.

When they arrived at Gryffindor tower, everyone began packing their trunks for the trip back to King's Cross. Unlike most of his classmates, Harry wasn't looking forward to the summer. *I suppose some things never change*, he mused.

Still, he got everything squared away and spent an hour down in the common room, finishing one last letter to Ginny. He was a little nervous telling her everything that had gone on at the end of the term, but he wanted to keep as few secrets from her as possible. *Like that's going to make a difference, with all that you haven't told her. She's never going to trust you again after she finds out.*

Harry stared at the end of his letter, lost in thought. He'd grown weary of the lies and deceptions, no matter how necessary they may have been. Did he really have friends, or just people he was manipulating into liking him? Okay, maybe that was a little harsh... he was just using what he'd learned about them over the years to help them... help them be happier, make them more likely to survive what was coming. But what gave him the right to decide what was better for them? Was he was starting to think like Dumbledore and his 'greater good'?

The Boy Who Lived sat with his quill dripping ink on his fingers. He let out a sigh. *The older me died for them. I remember him/me dying to come back and make it right. He's as much me as I am him. I'm just going to have to muddle through the best I can. I'll tell them as soon as it's safe, as soon as I know they can keep my secrets safe. If they are angry then... well, they'll have a right to be. But if they are still my friends, then they'll forgive me.*

Harry blotted his quill and looked down at his letter. He began writing again.

*Ginny, you're a smart girl, so you can probably tell that there are things I've left out of my letters. I already feel like I know you, and it bothers me that there are things I have to keep from my friends – but you most of all. I can promise you that this won't be a permanent thing. We're working on a way to keep our secrets safe, and once we do you will know everything. I'm sorry I've had to do things this way, but once it's done, I hope you will understand and forgive me.*

He stared down at the paragraph and grimaced. *She'll probably think I'm mental after reading that*, he thought. All the same, he felt a little lighter inside. Just writing that down made him feel... cleaner, in a way.

*After reading that, you probably think I'm mental. Or at least utterly paranoid and I wouldn't blame you one bit. One of our friends, Hermione Granger, you know, the one Ron likes to argue with, figured out that one of our professors is using some kind of magic to get inside people's heads and read their memories. He used it one too many times to get us in trouble and Hermione found him out.*

*That's the reason for all the cloak and dagger stuff. He has trouble getting into my head, for some reason, which is good because there would be a lot of trouble if he could see all my memories. Again, please keep this to yourself. Ron doesn't know yet, but if you want to know what that professor is like, ask him about Potions class – just be prepared to cover your ears when he gets loud.*

*I hope to see you when I get off the train tomorrow.*

*Your friend,*

*Harry*

Harry slipped out of the common room and pulled the invisibility cloak out of his bag when he saw the coast was clear. Everyone else must have been preparing for the end of the term, because he didn't see anyone on his trip to the Owlery and back. When he returned to his dormitory, Harry had the longest uninterrupted night's sleep he'd enjoyed since Boxing Day.

Harry and Hermione made a point of not letting Ron or Neville out of their sight while they rode the Hogwarts Express. Harry didn't remember Draco trying to harass anyone after their first year, but the Malfoy heir had also been a lot more aggressive this year. Harry knew that it was his meddling that caused this, but he couldn't really see that much he could have done differently.

He knew that submitting to Malfoy's harassment would only lead to larger problems later on. The boy already had a large following in his own house, and if no one stood up to him Harry was pretty sure the other students would be cowed as well. He brooded about this while Neville was showing them sketches for the greenhouse he was to help organize during the summer.

Still, he had a whole summer to plot and plan and worry. This was his last chance to be with his friends for months, and he knew he should enjoy it while it lasted. So Harry joined in when Ron started talking about maybe trying out for the Quidditch team in a year or two. As all the current players were quite good, he reasoned, his best chance was to wait until Oliver Wood graduated year after next. Harry agreed, though he had to be careful not to appear too certain. To Harry's

surprise, Neville wondered aloud who'd be replacing the twins at beater when they left Hogwarts.

"Well, you should come over during the summer, Neville, and practice with them a bit," Ron encouraged him. "It's part of the senior team members responsibilities to make sure the reserves are trained up properly." There was not a hint of mockery in Ron's voice – he'd taken on that deadly serious tone he always adopted when discussing his favourite sport.

"Maybe," Neville said thoughtfully. "I'm not well coordinated, though."

Ron shrugged and grinned. "Neither were Fred and George. My oldest brother, Bill, tells me when they were toddlers they were always falling down. He and Charlie called them 'Crash' and 'Bang' until Mum made them stop."

That got a laugh from the whole compartment.

"Seriously, though, I am going to ask Mum when you can all come over this summer," Ron continued.

"Just don't tell Fred and George first," Harry said in a worried voice, and they all cracked up again.

Like all good things, their journey eventually came to an end. Harry was happy to note that he could shift his trunk a bit easier than he could at the beginning of the year.

He and his friends stood in the milling crowd at Platform Nine and Three Quarters, looking for their families. Neville's grandmother showed up first, looking very regal and intimidating.

"H-harry, Ron, Hermione, this is my Gran," Neville stammered.

Harry stepped forward and shook her hand. "I'm Harry," he said.

"Augusta Longbottom, Mr. Potter. Nice to meet you," she said, frowning down at him. "I must say, you do look remarkably like your father."

Harry nodded. "As much as Neville looks like his mum. I'd like to thank you for helping him find that photograph; it means a lot to me."

"Think nothing of it. I'm glad to see Neville finally making some friends." Neville winced a little at that.

Harry shrugged, smiling. "Hard not to be friends with someone who goes toe to toe with a mountain troll and saves your life." He ignored Mrs. Longbottom's mouth falling open, and cuffed his friend affectionately on the shoulder. "Have a good summer, Nev."

The Grangers were not hard to pick out of the crowd. They were dressed very smartly in the Muggle fashion, but were wide-eyed staring at all the oddly-dressed Wizarding folk on the platform.

"Mom, Dad!" Hermione cried, getting their attention. She quickly introduced her friends to her parents.

"So you're the Harry that finally got my daughter interested in exercise?" her father asked, eying him speculatively.

*I'm not the one you should be worrying about,* Harry thought with amusement. "Well, we don't really have any sort of physical education or sport class at Hogwarts," he said soberly. Hermione gave her father an outraged glare.

Mrs. Granger simply watched her husband and daughter with amusement.

"Er, well it was good to meet you all," Mr. Granger said. "Let me help you with your trunk, dear."

Hermione rolled her eyes at Harry. "I'll get right on it," she mouthed before turning to follow her parents into the crowd.

"What's that all about?" Ron asked.

"Just something to maybe get Snape off our backs," Harry said. "She's worked out some of what he's been doing."

“Ha! I knew if we could get her on board, she’d find something,” Ron practically crowed. “She’s brilliant, she is. That greasy git is in for it now.”

Harry just looked at Ron with amusement. The twins joined them, saying goodbye to Lee Jordan. Angelina and Katie, two of the Gryffindor chasers, waved to them and Harry and the twins waved back. Percy trailed behind, talking to a tall brunette Harry recognized as being in Ravenclaw.

“Oi Ronnikins—“

“Any sign of Mum?”

“Not yet,” Ron replied, peering through the crowd. Finally, he climbed on top of his trunk and began waving his arms. “Over here!”

Harry smiled as he saw the Weasley matriarch emerging from the crowd. He saw Ginny trailing behind her and his grin got even wider.

“Ronald, you’re getting so tall!” she said as she drew her youngest son into a crushing embrace.

“Mum, gerrof!” Ron’s voice was muffled.

She let him go, a bit reluctantly, and gave each of the twins a hug they grudgingly accepted, though Harry didn’t think they were that embarrassed.

Ginny gave Ron a quick hug as well and then turned toward Harry. “Hello,” she said quietly, eyes a little downcast. She was wearing a floral print blouse and a knee-length green skirt that contrasted vividly with her hair.

“Hello Ginny,” Harry said, unable to keep from smiling. He’d spent thirteen years thinking he’d never say those words again. It was enough.

His voice made her reluctantly look up. Her eyes widened. When Harry changed out of his robes, he’d slipped the scarf out of his trunk and draped it across his shoulders. Harry coughed a little, holding the

back of his hand in front of his mouth. "Picked up a little cold during morning run," he said quietly, as her face turned pink.

"Well, are you lot ready to go?" Mrs. Weasley asked. "Harry, have you seen your family yet?"

Harry tore his eyes away from Ginny and looked at her mother in confusion. "Oh, they aren't coming. I figured I'd just take the Knight Bus back to Surrey."

Mrs. Weasley blinked. "Oh. I see. Well, we're taking the bus back to the village as well, so you might as well follow us."

Harry nodded and checked Hedwig's cage before tilting his trunk onto the rollers and following the Weasleys out into King's Cross. Ginny lagged behind a bit, walking next to Harry. He was visibly nervous, but at least she wasn't avoiding him like she'd done until fifth year.

"I got your letter this morning," She said quietly.

"Ah, good." Harry didn't know what else to say.

"About that part at the end, er, it's okay. Really. You don't owe me any explanations."

"I don't?" Harry said, as a cold ache began to spread in the pit of his stomach. "I, er, well... I thought we were friends, at least."

She looked at him quickly, frowning. "You don't want to be friends?" she asked in a hurt tone.

"No! I mean, yes I do..." Harry broke off as he manoeuvred around a luggage trolley. "I do want to be your friend, Ginny. I just don't want anything else to muck it up."

"Oh," was all she said as she resumed studying the tile floor they were walking across. What Harry could see of her cheeks was nearly the same colour as her hair. He was only peripherally aware of passing through the barrier and heading out to the curb while Mrs. Weasley hailed the Knight Bus.

They piled onto the bus in order, and Harry was happy to find himself and Ginny sharing one of the rotating and sliding bench seats. She blushed crimson every time the seat's gyrations made her slide into him, but Harry was not complaining.

Ron sat with his mother... though 'fended off' might have been a better description. She'd obviously missed him this year; Ginny's letters mentioned her mom getting weepy at times when something reminded her of her absent sons.

The twins also sat together, planning Merlin knew what and staring at Percy sitting alone on another seat.

After a particularly good jolt, as the bus slid around a four car pile-up, Ginny nearly fell over in the seat. Harry reached out and grabbed her shoulder without thinking. He stopped her fall, but an instant later they were both blushing as he drew his hand back like it had been burned.

*That's really odd, he reflected, I'm certainly acting more like an eleven year old than a thirty year old – or even twenty if you split the difference. I suppose that's my glands affecting my behaviour. The joys of puberty revisited,* he thought sourly.

All too soon, Stan Shunpike stood up and announced they'd arrived at Ottery St. Catchpole. Ginny gave him a shy smile as she stood up. Her family was all gathering their things. Harry would give anything to be joining them, but it was impossible. "I'll write you soon," she whispered.

He looked up at her and smiled. "Please do," he whispered back. She smiled again and followed her brothers off the bus.

Harry looked out the window and watched the Weasleys walk down the path to The Burrow, talking and laughing. He felt miserable and alone as the bus pulled away, heading down the road, and eventually, to Surrey.

End of year one...

A/N



Okay, this finishes Harry's first year at Hogwarts. I figured this would be a good stopping point, and not leave you any longer than necessary with that cliffhanger. (See, I'm not totally evil.)

Now, on to the comments!

Regarding Sirius. Yes, Harry wants him out of Azkaban, but right now he has no proof without Pettigrew, and he knows a prophecy was already made before saying that when he's freed it will signal Voldemort's return. In this chapter Harry attempted to cash in some of his chips with Albus to see if something can be done for his godfather. Yes, Harry is having to make some very hard choices, and his conscience is raising hell with him frequently (as you can see). Having seen what happens in the future, he's willing to do almost anything to prevent it from happening.

No, it wasn't a port-key. But the jerking sensation when Fred and George grabbed into his robes nearly stopped poor Harry's heart. Yes, it was evil, but I've had a kinesthetic flashback before (from breaking my ankle) and they are severely un-fun.

Getting Quirrell's wand away from him isn't that hard after he's been chomped by Fluffy. That's **three** sets of teeth, all tearing in different directions. Quirrell might have even died from those wounds alone.

Remarks made in the Restricted Section – Harry has always had issues with people keeping secrets from him... and it's worse this time around because it's more obvious to him when people are doing it.

Thanks for the reviews – they motivate me to get this out even faster!

Year two begins soon!

-Matthew

## Chapter 9

Molly Weasley was concerned.

She wasn't one of those overprotective mothers who worried and fretted over her children. Her two eldest sons had chosen particularly dangerous careers, and she'd respected their wishes - after a while, anyway. It was her prerogative to wish they'd gone into something a little... safer... than breaking into magically-trapped tombs or taking care of wild dragons. But still, after some convincing... and tears... she respected their wishes.

She tried to talk them out of it no more than once a year.

Still, it was another matter entirely when her youngest children were behaving oddly. Ronald and Ginevra were still practically babies.

At first it had been her daughter, and all those letters. She wasn't opposed to her having a quill-pal. She was proud of her for helping that strange boy in the ragged clothes through the barrier. It was a shock later to find out he was the famous Boy Who Lived. She hadn't met the Potters but a few times before that awful night. She knew Arthur had done some things with James to help the Order, but as a rule he didn't discuss very much about those missions. It was enough to know they were dangerous. Still, she knew they were from a wealthy family, and she couldn't understand why the boy looked so underfed and poorly cared for.

As they left King's Cross, she noticed her daughter wouldn't meet her eyes, and was blushing. She didn't have to be a seer to recognize a crush when she saw one. She hoped her daughter wasn't too let down when it was over, but it seemed to be an essential part of becoming a woman, so she didn't worry too much.

Ginny had been very quiet during their journey home, and went to bed early after dinner. After washing up, Molly went upstairs to make sure her daughter wasn't coming down with something. Long experience at being a mother gave her the habit of listening at the door before knocking. That had proven to be an exceptionally good idea when dealing with the twins.

Molly thought she could make out some quiet sobbing, mixed with some words. "...gone for a year..." *She must be missing her brother already.* "...I'm here all alone..." *I'll have to make sure we have some girl-time this year.* "...but he did say I was p-pretty..." Molly frowned.

When she knocked, the sound completely cut off. "Are you all right, dear?"

"Y-yes Mum," her daughter's voice couldn't hide a quaver.

"If you have trouble sleeping, I can heat up some milk with cinnamon for you," Molly offered. It worked like a charm when Ginny was teething.

"That's all right, Mum. I'm just a little tired. I shouldn't have any trouble."

"All right, dear. Just let me know if you need anything," Molly said.

After that her daughter was quiet, though she did have a tendency to mope about the house. Molly did her best to try and cheer her up, but Ginny didn't seem to enjoy cooking nearly as much as eating, and the knitting had been a disaster. Molly wouldn't have minded a bit of help making the Weasley jumpers this year, but it soon became clear that her daughter had neither the patience nor the skill needed. When Ginny became so frustrated that a burst of accidental magic set her yarn on fire, Molly suggested they take a little break.

A few days later, a snowy white owl fluttered through the window and settled on the kitchen table. It didn't look like a regular postal owl, and Molly wondered where she'd seen one like that before. When she reached for the thick packet of parchment tied to its leg, the owl snapped its beak at her and hopped backwards, flapping its wings in annoyance. She was wondering if the owl had got lost or misdirected when Ginny came down the stairs.

"Morning, mum," she yawned. "I- oh!" was all she said before she dashed up to the table. The owl docilely allowed her to remove the letter. Ginny looked around and saw the plate full of bacon that Molly had just fried. "Can I give a piece to the owl, Mum?"

Molly just nodded, a little dumbfounded, as the owl delicately accepted the treat from her daughter. It gave a soft hoot and flew up to the perch beside Errol. The ancient Weasley family owl just turned its head to look at the newcomer and then closed its eyes again.

Molly watched her daughter surreptitiously through the morning meal. Ginny ate with one hand; her attention fully focused on the letter in her other hand. She was about to say something when Ginny started asking her about doing laundry.

Finally, Ginny explained that the boy she'd met at King's Cross had asked if he could write her and ask questions about how wizards did things. Molly was a little dumbfounded that the Boy Who Lived was left to be raised by Muggles and kept ignorant of magic all of his life, but she supposed there was a good reason. She wondered aloud why he needed such a long letter to ask a few questions. Ginny blushed and said he promised to tell her all about what he was doing at Hogwarts so she'd know what to expect next year.

Molly felt a stab of sympathy. Ginny had been heartbroken when she realized she would have to wait a year longer than her brother before she could go to Hogwarts as well. Molly was the youngest of her siblings, so she knew how it felt to be left behind by her brothers. She sighed. Gideon and Fabian were still an open wound for her. Every so often, her thoughts would bump into it and reopen the sense of loss. There was nothing to do at that point except hug her daughter and help her find some parchment.

That began a curious correspondence that became as frequent as twice a week. Hedwig, as she learned the owl to be named, was a frequent guest at The Burrow. Ginny had never been overly studious in her lessons before, so Molly was surprised by how diligently she worked on her letters to Harry. Molly was amused that the domestic charms lessons her daughter had frequently drowsed through were now of vital interest to her little girl. Between answering her questions and Harry's questions, Molly found herself explaining things in far greater detail than she anticipated. She also deduced from Harry's questions that he was an extremely intelligent young man.

Ginny didn't talk directly about what she read in those letters, and Molly would not violate her privacy by reading them without her knowledge. Well, she did consider it, but she knew her daughter would be both crushed and angry if she found out. They both missed the boys, for various reasons, and Molly had no desire to spoil things between the only two people in the house for most of the day.

Her daughter did, however, ask her a lot of questions that weren't directly related to domestic magic. From these, Molly got the impression that she was worried about Harry. Ginny didn't think the Muggles Harry lived with were very good people. While Molly wasn't as enthusiastic a student of Muggle customs as her husband, she didn't think it was as bad as her daughter implied.

On the other hand, the name Malfoy rang all sorts of warning bells. Arthur Weasley was a very easy-going man, as friendly and forgiving as he was courageous, and Molly loved him for it. But if her husband could be said to hate anyone, then Lucius Malfoy would be the top candidate for that position. Molly couldn't forget the speculation that the Malfoys had been involved in the raid that led to her brothers' deaths. Antonin Dolohov had at least been captured and sent to Azkaban for leading the raid. The Malfoy influence and money, on the other hand, allowed them to escape justice after Voldemort's disappearance.

Molly knew the Malfoy heir would be around the appropriate age to be starting Hogwarts. Apparently Draco was more than willing to follow in his father's footsteps, and Harry and Ron had more than one run-in with the boy. Molly didn't say anything, but Ginny apparently picked up on her tension.

Ronald was a good boy, but he wasn't much of a letter writer, and his brief notes hadn't mentioned any trouble at school. Ginny ended up reassuring her that Ron had made friends with Harry, along with the Longbottom boy and a Muggle-born witch. The four of them had some trouble with Draco and his friends, but it hadn't been too serious.

Her worries about her youngest boy got a lot stronger after she received a Floo call on Halloween. Arthur always worked late on

Halloween, often up all night with his co-workers in the Misuse of Muggle Artefacts office, reversing the often-malicious pranks played on Muggles this night.

So she was alone, just putting away some dishes after dinner, when her fire turned green and she heard Professor McGonagall's voice. Ron and his friends had got into a battle with a mountain troll that had broken into the castle. Molly was quite convinced that her heart would stop in that instant. When Professor McGonagall assured her that her son was unharmed, she was finally able to move her feet again. She locked the kitchen door and quickly Flooed to Hogwarts.

Ron barely responded as she berated him in the professor's office. She couldn't believe how foolish and reckless he was. A troll that size could have crushed his skull in a heartbeat. Usually, her lectures had her boys red-faced and apologetic within minutes, but instead he seemed distracted, staring off into the corner and barely acknowledging her presence.

Finally, she took him by the shoulders and turned him to face her directly. "What is wrong with you, Ron?" she asked.

He looked her in the eye and shuddered. "Mum, I know you're mad, but if I hadn't been there... Harry and Hermione might have *died*. Harry almost did anyway..." In her youngest son's sapphire blue eyes she saw the same fear of losing people that she'd lived with since the war. Any anger she had at that point evaporated and she hugged him fiercely.

She wasn't surprised to later learn that Draco and his friends had precipitated that disaster... Though the crudity of their comments made her blush almost as much as Ron when she asked him what they said. She smoothed down her son's hair and told him it was very admirable to stick up for one's friends... but it was better to do it using your head than your heart. Ron grunted and said Harry told him much the same thing.

When she thanked Professor McGonagall for the use of her office, Molly was surprised to learn that no punishments were to be given out. Harry led his friends to the third floor, but he more than paid the price with his injury. The Gryffindor head of house felt more inclined

to grant points for their defence of another student, but she didn't want to encourage foolhardy behaviour in others. There was also the matter of the Slytherin head of house refusing to punish his students for 'idle social gossip', no matter how deliberately hurtful.

Molly was still disgruntled by that last revelation when she Flooed home. No sooner had she opened the kitchen door than Ginny fell against her, sobbing wildly.

"Are they all right? Why didn't you let me come?" she cried.

"I'm sorry dear. But if you heard then you know Ron is all right."

"I know that!" she snapped. "What about Harry and the rest?"

Molly blinked. "Harry hurt his arm, but they've already fixed it and he's resting comfortably. The rest of them are just shaken up."

Ginny let out a sigh and went limp in her arms. She was unresisting as Molly put her to bed. Afterwards, she began mixing the ingredients for some pie dough. She had some heavy thinking to do, and cooking kept her hands busy while her mind worked.

It seemed her daughter was getting rather attached to her quill-pal. Normally, she might have just passed this off as a star-struck crush on the "Boy Who Lived". But Ginny had been heart-broken when she returned, and devastated when she heard that Harry had been injured. Ginny was far too young to be chasing after boys, no telling what kind of reputation she'd get at this rate. She'd try to keep an eye on her daughter, and be there when she wanted to talk. She knew from long experience that trying to push the issue would make things worse.

She got a pleasant surprise as the Christmas season approached. Arthur was invited to a conference in Bulgaria, and she and Ginny would be able to travel along as well. This was a perfect opportunity to visit their second-oldest son and see the dragon preserve in Romania where he worked. Ginny was happy she'd get to see Charlie again, but she wasn't as enthusiastic as Molly expected.

When she wrote Ron with the news, she expected him to be upset at being left at Hogwarts for Christmas. Instead, she got a letter back that put a lump in her throat. Her youngest boy, who was occasionally thoughtless, was glad he was staying at Hogwarts to spend Christmas with his friend. Any doubts she'd had regarding Harry's Muggle guardians were dispelled when she read that he'd never had a Christmas present before. She felt as ill as her son when she learned that news, but the worst part was when Ron reported how calmly his friend told them this. He wasn't being dramatic or seeking sympathy – this was normal to him. She found a nice skein of dark green yarn and set to work on another jumper.

As November rolled past, Molly tried to talk her daughter into giving knitting another go. Her line about 'hand-made gifts mean a lot more' did the job, but she was surprised when Ginny asked for the left-over green yarn from Harry's jumper. Knowing her sons, Molly expected her daughter to make something for her parents, knowing that would be safe from ridicule. Instead, she wanted the yarn "because it matches his eyes, Mum". Her daughter blushed lightly, but Molly didn't comment. She was surprised her daughter even remembered what colour the boy's eyes were, but she supposed she should know better than to underestimate a first crush.

All in all, the scarf came out fairly well. Ginny, however, fretted over the lumpy knots and uneven edges. Molly had to reassure her daughter several times that it did indeed 'look all right' before she shipped off the packages.

She was a little surprised to discover that Harry had sent Ginny a Christmas gift as well. She was reassured when she saw the title of the book – "Quidditch Through the Ages". Trust an eleven year old boy to buy a little girl a book about Quidditch of all things! Ginny seemed abnormally interested in the book, but it was probably due to a lack of interesting things to do at the dragon tamer camp.

When they returned to The Burrow, the snowy owl visited them with a note for both her and Ginny.

Dear Mrs. Weasley,



Thank you so much for the jumper and the fudge. It's nice and warm and the best Christmas present I've ever received. Your kindness and generosity helped make my first Christmas at Hogwarts the best one I can remember.

Sincerely,

Harry

He hadn't mentioned the things Ron put in his letter. He didn't complain about anything. He simply thanked her for the gift-- in such an amazed tone that she knew that every word Ron had written was true. Ginny's letter was considerably longer, but by the time she finished it, she was smiling and a little teary-eyed.

Things settled into a routine after that. Molly began casually asking how Harry was doing when Ginny received a new letter. She got to hear about his Quidditch victories in more detail than she really wanted. Her husband and sons were all mad about the game, and she'd been hoping her daughter could have avoided the curse. Unfortunately it appeared Harry picked better than he knew when he bought her that book.

The letters also led to some odd conversations. One spring evening, Molly worried aloud during dinner about Ron getting good marks his first year. Arthur reassured her that the boy would do well, but Ginny just laughed.

"Ginevra, it's not a laughing matter. Good marks are important if Ron wants to get a job with the Ministry or, well, wherever," she scolded.

"Sorry Mum," Ginny apologized. "I just don't think you have much to worry about. Harry said that the four of them usually get the top marks in their class work."

Molly and Arthur just stared at their daughter.

"Ron didn't tell you?" Ginny asked. "What a prat. No wonder he's always third or fourth."

Her husband looked like he was trying to keep from laughing. "Ginny, honey, is there something you'd like to share with your mother?"

Ginny rolled her eyes. "I suppose he doesn't want to act like Percy, going on about his grades all the time. In most of their classes, Harry and Hermione Granger get the first and second highest grades. Ron and Neville Longbottom usually get the next two highest. Except in Herbology, I think. Neville knows that better than anyone. They all study together, and Harry says that Hermione is really smart. I think Harry's pretty smart too, if he does almost as well as her."

Ronald had avoided the subject of grades in his letters home, and Molly had assumed the worst. It's possible he was embarrassed if his friends usually did better, but being fourth out of your class at Hogwarts was nothing to be ashamed of. She was going to give him a talking to when he got home for the summer.

Molly and her daughter were both up early for the journey to King's Cross to pick up Ron, Fred, George, and Percy. She got a momentary shock when she saw Ron's head sticking up above the crowd, but then she realized he was standing on his trunk. When he stepped down, she noticed he'd still visibly grown. He was roughly the same height as the twins, and he'd grown a bit sturdier as well.

Harry wasn't as thin as she remembered, but his Muggle clothes were just as ragged and ill-fitting. The boy looked almost confused when she asked where his guardians were. She knew the parents of every Hogwarts child received a letter detailing where and when to pick up their child after the term was over. She felt a little ill when instead the boy said he'd just take the Knight Bus back to his house. She couldn't imagine a family letting an eleven year old boy travel through London by himself, but she didn't want to make a fuss and embarrass the poor dear.

She kept an eye on her daughter as she talked to Ron about his term. She got him to turn over the parchment with his final grades and she almost burst into tears. He'd been doing as well as Ginny assured her, but he was horribly embarrassed when she went to hug him. She just couldn't help it. He'd done so well, especially after the twins' lacklustre academic performance.

Harry and Ginny, however, talked in low tones that she couldn't make out. He only touched her once, when she nearly toppled over, and only for an instant. Seeing him pull back quickly as they both blushed was reassuring as well.

Ginny and Ron were silent as they got off the bus. She saw Ginny stare after the bus as it left, and it wasn't hard to tell what she was thinking.

It wasn't until they got back to the house that Ron mentioned breaking his wand. Molly was upset at his carelessness; it would take her most of the summer to save up enough money to buy a replacement. She was letting him know how disappointed she was when he handed her a stack of galleons.

"Ron, where did you get this money?" she asked shrilly. She could think of several ways, none of them good. Percy looked equally upset.

"Harry broke my wand, accidentally, and he wouldn't leave me alone until he gave me the money to pay for it," he said as he looked down. Molly realized now why he'd waited until they got home, instead of saying something while they were still out and could go to Ollivander's. He didn't want her saying anything to Harry about the accident and embarrassing him.

"Well, he didn't have to do that, but it was very responsible of him." She frowned. "But why... if he has money, why does...?" she trailed off, not knowing how she wanted to phrase the question.

"Why does he dress like that, you mean?" Ron asked, his face getting red. "Because he has a vault his mum and dad left him, that his aunt and uncle don't know anything about. If they did, they'd take it away from him. He just spends it on books and school supplies. It's not like it's even real money to him. So he goes on wearing torn up hand-me-downs from his cousin, because they can't stand to see him dressed decently... and now he's going back to those people."

She'd never heard Ron so angry before. Percy stared at him in disbelief while the twins had gone pale. Ginny ran up the stairs. The sound of her door slamming echoed down the stairwell.

“Well, dear, make sure to write to him often,” she said to Ron in a calm voice. “He seems like a nice boy and I’m sure he’ll need his friends. Now, I think we can make a trip to Diagon alley the day after tomorrow and see about a new wand.”

But she was wrong. The snowy white owl did not reappear at The Burrow. Errol took many letters addressed to Harry Potter, but never returned with any.

A/N

All right, figured I would post this before returning to Harry’s point of view.

Now, on to the comments!

I think I fixed the King’s Cross vs. Crossing slip. Thanks for pointing that out!

Yes, I’m continuing year two and so on in this story. I figured I should make it easier for people with the alerts system.

Ron is learning. He has to grow up a little faster this time around, but it’s also bringing out some of his better traits under fire.

Yes, there are things that have been removed from the restricted section. Remember Dumbledore’s private stash of forbidden lore in the prologue?

One of the key events from year one is Hermione reasoning out that Snape was using legilimency. This gives everyone a reason to learn occlumency without revealing Harry’s foreknowledge.

With regards to alternate ‘ships: This is canon with HBP. Harry has been grieving for Ginny for over thirteen years. He has probably built up an idealized image of her in his mind over that time period, but that’s what mentally unbalanced people do. Also, he’s spent ten years traveling with a ‘for-all-intents-and-purposes-married’ Ron and Hermione during the second war... then trying to help a grieving Ron for a couple of years after that. He’d feel like he was cheating on his friends if he even thought about Hermione as anything other than a

sister/sister-in-law. If you notice, he's made a few small nudges to try and get them together again – maybe a little faster than last time. It's his duty to his beloved dead, and one of the only things that keeps him going.

Argh! I've been trying to avoid any overt Americanisms. If AWMPPerry (you mentioned seeing some) or any other qualified Brit-pickers care to clue me in, I'd appreciate it!

Thanks for the reviews – they motivate me to get this out even faster!

-Matthew

## Chapter 10

It was with great reluctance that Harry returned to Number Four, Privet Drive. He was really tempted to just take the Knight Bus back to Diagon Alley and get a room at the Leaky Cauldron. On the other hand, there were still people out there, not to mention Voldemort, who'd like nothing more than his head on a stick. The wards around the Dursley home would keep him safe, at least from outsiders.

Besides, Harry knew Dumbledore would play merry-hell if he didn't return.

Harry was still technically a minor, and thus accorded only slightly more rights than the typical house elf in Wizarding law. He didn't really see any other options, so he trudged up the walk to his uncle's house. He pulled his trunk behind him, with Hedwig's cage on top.

He pressed the doorbell with a sigh. A moment later, the door opened and his uncle glared down at him.

"Back, are you?"

"Yes, sir," Harry replied carefully. He needed as little trouble as possible over the next three months.

"Get in here," his uncle growled, "before decent people see you."

No sooner was Harry inside than his trunk was shoved into the cupboard under the stairs, which was then locked.

"I need that sir," he said carefully. "I have summer assignments to complete."

"There will be none of that in this house. I will not put up with your - unnaturalness - boy. Better for you if you flunked out of that filthy school and learned to live like a decent person." He glared at Harry, hands fidgeting at his sides.

Harry knew his uncle was just looking for an excuse to punish him, so he merely stood there and didn't say a word. Unfortunately, that seemed to infuriate the man further.

His uncle's slap caught Harry off guard, and he tumbled to the floor.

"Don't you try to put a spell on me, you filthy wretch!" his uncle screamed.

Harry was on his hands and knees, head spinning.

"Vernon, what is going on here?" his Aunt Petunia stood in the doorway, looking angry.

"The boy tried to do something unnatural," he said defensively.

"I was just staying quiet," Harry muttered. His jaw hurt abominably.

"You should have learned that lesson before," she hissed venomously.

Harry stifled a groan as he stood up. His remarks from last August must have really hit home. He'd said it while the memories were still merging, but it was nonetheless true. Petunia's envy of Lily's marriage to James was what spurred her to hate him. She'd never forgive him for knowing what he'd learned from his mother's diary in the Potter family vault.

He needed to keep his mouth shut if he didn't want to make it worse. "May I go to my room?" he asked quietly.

She sniffed, but nodded. Uncle Vernon, on the other hand, reached out toward Hedwig's cage and locked a padlock around the door.

"What are you - ?" Harry asked, stepping forward without thinking. He was shoved back against the wall and held there by Vernon's hand.

"That - Bloody - Owl - Stays - Here! Or I will personally wring its neck. We had a visit after you left for that bloody school. Constable came around, asking why you'd been seen outside late at night."

"S-sometimes, I can't s-sleep, when it's hot. So I just take a walk." Harry said quickly, hating the quaver in his voice. "I d-didn't want to bother anyone."

Vernon's meaty paw had a handful of Harry's sweatshirt. He pulled him away from the wall and slammed him into it again. "There will be no more late night walks of yours, freak, or I'll fix it so you never walk again. Your aunt isn't sticking up for you anymore, and if I had my way you'd be dead. Understand?"

Harry couldn't ever recall seeing his uncle so full of murderous intent. He just nodded his head dumbly. He was still trapped by circumstances. He had to stay here or everything might go to hell and everyone he cared about would die. "Yes, Uncle Vernon. I'm sorry and it won't happen again," he said meekly, hating himself even as the words left his mouth.

Harry found himself shoved toward the stairs, and tripped catching his footing. His cousin Dudley was watching from the second floor, his piggy eyes gleaming as Harry shakily ascended the stairs. As Harry passed him, Dudley shoved him hard with his elbow. Harry bounced painfully off the wall, but managed to stumble past, instead of falling back down the stairs.

Harry reached the spare bedroom and closed the door behind him with a sigh. He sat down on the lumpy mattress and checked his pockets. He had a money bag with a galleon and two sickles, his wand was under the sleeve of the baggy sweatshirt that Dudley had outgrown, and he unfolded Ginny's scarf from his pocket and slid it under his pillow.

It was going to be a very long summer.

The next day, Harry, still nursing his bruises, was put to work. The backyard garden had really gone to hell, and he was most of the day just weeding the beds.

His Aunt grudgingly fed him lunch before sending him back to work. Her manner was just as frigid and hostile as the previous night. She acted like she couldn't even stand the sight of him. As far as Harry was concerned, the feeling was mutual. But until he had somewhere to go, or some leverage over the Dursleys, he was still at their mercy. As far as the Wizarding world was concerned, they were his guardians and had full legal control of his affairs.



Harry made sure he was safely in his room and out of sight by the time Vernon got home. His arms and lower back ached from weeding, and the back of his neck was sunburned, but just being able to stretch out for a few minutes was a relief. He waited until he could hear them eating dinner before he chanced a trip to the loo.

Tired as he was, he still couldn't get to sleep immediately. He'd been so light-headed from getting knocked around that he couldn't remember dreaming last night. Tonight, he was sure the nightmares would return, and he wasn't sure he'd be able to keep quiet. Instead of sleeping, he lay awake, staring at the ceiling. Later on he could hear angry voices coming from the master bedroom. It sounded like his aunt and uncle were having a terrible row, but he couldn't imagine why.

When he heard his uncle's voice roaring something about "bloody James Potter", Harry's blood went cold. Had his uncle heard what he'd said to Aunt Petunia last August? Was that why the two of them were out for his blood now?

Eventually he drifted off around midnight. By some miracle when he woke up around four, he managed to not cry out. He squeezed his hands into fists so tight his knuckles shone white like bare bone. He was walking through the shattered courtyard at Hogwarts, finding his friends, finding Ginny again. He supposed the dream was triggered by him missing Hogwarts, but that didn't make it any easier.

Harry spent most of the next four weeks in much the same fashion. He didn't receive any letters, but he wasn't as disturbed this time around. Dobby was just up to his old tricks – trying to keep Harry safe by making him think none of his Hogwarts friends cared enough to send a letter. Instead of worrying, Harry just carefully thought through what he wanted to say when the house elf finally made an appearance. He knew that fear of him using magic was one of the few things restraining his uncle. He could not chance Dobby getting triggering a warning from the Ministry.

On the morning of his birthday, Harry didn't even care that the Dursley's hadn't remembered. After all that had happened, he could care less what the poster-children for reintroducing Muggle-hunting

thought of him. He just hoped that the Weasley boys would take the initiative like they'd done last time. Still, it was better to keep his head down until then. So he stayed well clear of Vernon's frantic preparations for the dinner party with the Masons. When he caught Dobby peering at him from the hedge, Harry just ignored him.

"I know what day it is," Dudley sang, waddling up behind him.

Harry didn't even get up from the bench. "Yes, it's my birthday," he said flatly.

"And I wonder why you haven't gotten any presents," Dudley asked in a snide voice.

"Probably because something's intercepting my mail," Harry said in a tired voice.

Dudley had his mouth open to respond, but nothing came out.

"And because I live with people who hate my guts. Aren't you glad you have parents that take care of you, Dudley?" Harry was too tired to fight with his cousin, and yet he couldn't leave it alone.

"It - it's no more than you deserve for being a freak," his cousin sneered.

"No," Harry disagreed with a resigned note in his voice. "It's because my parents were murdered for doing the right thing, and no one imagined my mother's sister could have a family so hateful. Aren't you proud, Dudley?" It was more than Harry meant to say, but it just spilled out of his mouth. He supposed he was talking to the cousin he lost to a Death Eater a world ago.

"I'm going to tell mum!" Dudley threatened.

"You do that, Dudley. And then she'll punish me and prove me right. Will that make you feel better about yourself?"

Dudley glared at him and stomped off. But Harry didn't hear his aunt start screaming at him.

As the sun set, he ducked into the kitchen and ate the cheese sandwich his aunt allowed him. His mouth watered as he smelled the pork roast sizzling in the oven, but he ignored the grumbling of his stomach.

Sure enough, Dobby was standing on his bed when he opened his bedroom door.

"Hello Dobby," Harry said. He smiled as the elf's bulging eyes got even wider. He figured a little showing off wouldn't hurt here, and might make it easier to convince the well-meaning house elf to stop interfering.

"Harry Potter already knows Dobby's name. Harry Potter is a most powerful wizard. Dobby is even more glad he came here to - here to -"  
"The tiny creature suddenly grabbed an ear and began to smack its forehead into the headboard.

Harry was anticipating this. He grabbed Dobby firmly around the middle and lifted him into the air preventing further punishment.

"Dobby!" Harry barked. "When a house elf is visiting another residence, are they required to obey their rules?"

"Yes, Harry Potter, unless they would be betraying their family."

"Good. Now the first rule of Harry Potter's Room is that house elves are expressly prohibited from punishing themselves. If any punishments are due, I will be making that decision. Is that clear?" He gently set the little manikin back on the bed.

"Harry Potter is too generous to a poor house elf! Harry Potter is the greatest wizard ever-" Dobby wailed.

Harry held up his hand. He could hear the conversation downstairs falter and kicked himself. "The second rule is that conversations must occur at a reasonable volume. I need to keep some things quiet, and I'd just as soon not have my uncle in here trying to throttle me. Is that clear as well?"

Dobby swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down in a comical fashion.

"Now, before we go any further. It will not be necessary for you to betray your family in any fashion. I know you belong to the Malfoy family. I know they are all Dark Wizards; I've met Draco and raising a child that foul requires conscious effort. I know they are planning to unleash a great evil at Hogwarts this year. While I appreciate your desire to protect me, I have to attend next year so that I can stop this evil."

"But Harry Potter is too important to risk! Harry Potter has escaped He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named twice now. But Harry Potter will be in mortal danger at Hogwarts!" The poor creature was almost frantic, and had begun tugging at its own floppy ears.

"Harry Potter is always in danger at Hogwarts. Harry Potter is in mortal danger everywhere he bloody goes," Harry growled, trying to master his frustration. "Look Dobby, you said I'm a great wizard, right?"

"Harry Potter is the Greatest Wizard ever!" the house elf agreed vehemently.

"Right then; you know what makes a wizard great?"

Dobby looked a little less sure of himself. "Harry Potter is powerful, and wise, and is much too nice to a poor house elf?"

"Someone told me once that a great wizard is one who does great things. Do you understand, Dobby?"

The house elf's bulging eyes just blinked at him.

"If you stop me from going to Hogwarts to keep me safe from the Malfoy's plot, if you stop me from protecting my friends, you will be helping the Malfoys. You will be keeping me from becoming a great wizard."

Dobby sighed, defeated.

"I do, however, appreciate what you were trying to do. If I can find a way to get you away from the Malfoy's, I will."

Dobby just stared at Harry in wonder. *Not surprising, I suppose, Harry mused, I did just name his fondest unspoken desire.*

After a moment Dobby shook his head. "Dobby does not know how Harry Potter knows all these things, but Dobby will not interfere with the great wizard."

"I appreciate that, Dobby. I don't suppose I could have my mail now, could I?"

Dobby grinned sheepishly and waved his hand. A stack of letters and a couple of packages appeared on Harry's rickety old desk. "Dobby must go now, or Dobby's family will know. Dobby knows Harry Potter will become the greatest wizard ever!" With a quiet pop, the elf disappeared.

Harry sighed with relief. *At least that's one disaster averted.*

He smiled as he sorted through the letters. By far the most were from Ginny. He easily had a day's worth of reading material. If her letters continued to keep the nightmares at bay, he'd be smarter to read them in order and reply to each individually in order to space them out.

Of course, with Hedwig locked up, he'd have to wait for Errol to return again. Now that Dobby wasn't using house elf magic to collect the letters as soon as the owl entered the property, Harry could use the Weasley owl to send a reply. As long as he left the window open at night, it should work out.

Harry didn't remember anyone sending him a birthday gift last time, but then again he'd never gotten his mail back from Dobby either. *They probably didn't want me to feel bad after they found out about Dobby,* he reasoned. A large box was about a foot square, wrapped in brightly-coloured paper. There wasn't a tag, but one of the letters underneath it had probably been attached at one point. Harry untied the bow and pulled the lid off.

He jumped back with a strangled cry as four small black blurs leapt out of the box. One immediately latched onto his forearm and he felt sharp teeth pierce his skin. Harry slapped it away but it left a semi-circle of bleeding holes. The wound immediately began to burn and sting. Harry stumbled back, waving his hands to try and keep them away from his face.

It took him a moment to recognize them as Doxies. He and the Weasleys had to clean out a nest of them at Grimmauld place. Mrs. Weasley had warned them that their bite was poisonous as well. *Damn, where's a bottle of Doxycide when you need one?*

The vicious biting fairies swarmed around him, feinting at his eyes, tearing at his face. Harry jumped back, trying to land as quietly as possible. The murmurs of polite dinner conversation echoing from below add a surreal counterpoint to the struggle. One of the pair attacking his face looped back for another run, and Harry's hand snapped out in a textbook back-fist strike. His whole arm unfolded at once and his knuckles snapped into the flying pest like the crack of a whip. The Doxy flew across the room and smacked into the wall over his bed with a faint cry.

The other Doxy crowding his face veered off and Harry picked up the lumpy pillow from his bed and swatted it to the ground. He stomped on it before it could get airborne again and heard a ghastly crunching sound. He looked up, turning, when Hedwig made a whistling screech.

One of the Doxies had tried to reach her through the cage bars and been seized by a very sharp set of talons. That Doxy was making a hideous keening sound, but its partner had circled around the cage and grabbed a handful of feathers on Hedwig's head. Its other clawed hand was reaching toward her large eyes.

Harry didn't even stop to think. His wand was in his hand in a flash, and a cutting charm tore the Doxy to pieces before it could gouge out his familiar's eyes. The Doxy in Hedwig's talon let out a final screech and stopped moving. She daintily opened her claws and let the foul creature dropped to the floor.

Harry stood frozen, almost nauseous with dread. The Ministry had to have detected that spell, and he knew what was next. He frantically

hid his wand under the mattress. It was the only brother wand to Voldemort's and he didn't want his uncle snapping it in a fit of rage. He'd barely started cleaning up the dead Doxies when the scream from Mrs. Mason announced the arrival of the Ministry owl. The woman was deathly afraid of birds and Mr. Mason thought the owl was some sort of practical joke and left.

Harry steeled himself at he heard his uncle stomping up the stairs. *If I hex him now, everything is bollixed up. The Ministry will snap my wand. Lucius Malfoy would buy Fudge a Swiss Chalet to see that happen. Voldemort will get me and everyone will die and it will be all my fault. I've got to get through this. Ron and the twins may be coming soon anyway. I just have to get through this.*

The door burst open and his uncle stood there in the doorway in his dinner jacket, his bow tie askew. The parchment from the Improper Use of Magic Office was crumpled in his fist. Harry was still kneeling on the floor, using the lid of the gift box to scrape up the stomped Doxy.

"You never said you weren't allowed to use magic over the holidays," Vernon said in a low growl.

*I just have to get through this. He'll hit me a few times and then I can wait for Ron and the twins.* "S-someone sent me a pranked gift for my birthday," he said quickly. "These things tried to kill me. They're poisonous." He held up box he was collecting the dead Doxies in.

With surprising agility, his uncle kicked the box out of Harry's hand. He bit back a cry as something snapped in his left hand. "Then we'll just have to make sure you don't have any more birthdays, won't we?" Vernon followed this statement with a backhanded blow that knocked Harry to the floor. Harry might have been able to dodge it, but that would have blown things up even worse.

Harry felt a hard foot slam into his stomach, lifting him from the ground.

"You try to do anything now; they'll expel you from that school."

Something struck the side of his neck and a hot pain seared down his side. Harry wondered when the blows would stop.

“I’ll show you what happens when you interfere in *MY* business.”

Harry saw the next kick heading for his face and tried to block it. For some reason his body wouldn’t move right and his left arm flopped weakly in front of him. Vernon’s foot snapped a bone in his forearm and drove Harry’s already injured hand into his face.

*I don’t think he’s going to stop*, was Harry’s last coherent thought.

A/N

Okay, a short chapter, but that seemed like a good spot...

Any “Americanisms” pointed out in reviews will be promptly removed, so feel free to Brit-pick all you like.

Harry has a bone of two to pick with Dumbeldore, among others. A reckoning will come, but it may not be soon.

Harry/Luna is just as unlikely for the same reasons I posted in the prior author notes regarding Harry/Hermione. Merged Harry would feel like he was betraying multiple people.

When Dumbledore said “Harry, I am sorry for what happened, more than you will probably ever know. I didn’t mean to upset you by bringing that up. I promise you I will see what can be done about that other issue as well.” He was saying he was sorry for Harry’s domestic situation, and that he would do something about the legilimency probing. More about Albus’ domestic interference (or lack of which) will be discussed later.

The various Weasleys will play a serious role in the story to come, so last chapter is just setting the stage, in some ways.

As you can tell from this chapter, Harry feels very constrained in his dealings with the Dursleys... and the ‘butterfly effect’ just landed a haymaker on him.



Harry's interactions with Ginny are a mix of older awareness, younger anxiety and hormones, and a dash of wonder at even seeing her again.

Reciprokates – You pretty much nailed a good bit of it.

Harry's power level is something yet to be revealed. But hints have been dropped in the previous chapters,

My lovely beta – Runsamok – says she isn't a cook, so the pie batter slip isn't her fault. I fully intend on taunting her mercilessly because I asked her specifically. Thanks, Ramos!

Thanks for the reviews and kind words – they motivate me to get this out even faster! And the nit-picks make me write it better!

-Matthew

## Chapter 11

Harry awoke to find himself lying on his bed, fully clothed. He started to sit up and quickly realized that was a serious mistake. His entire body was one big throbbing ache.

*Merlin, what did he do to me?* he wondered groggily.

His left arm was definitely broken, but worse, he couldn't move either his arm or his leg on that side. He had a creeping pins and needles feeling that was very strong in his fingers and toes and gradually reducing as it moved up his limbs. Trying to turn his head to the left brought forth a massive spike of pain from the side of his neck. Harry's eyes watered uncontrollably as the air caught in his lungs. The struggling breaths also informed him of several broken ribs. He wiped at his eyes with his right hand, which could still move. He noticed the doxy bite on his arm looked angry and inflamed, and the centre had turned a dark purple, almost black.

*How long was I out?* he wondered.

Glancing down without moving his head, he could see afternoon light filtering through his curtains and between the bars fixed to his windows.

*How could that ruddy installer put bars on the windows and not notice me lying here?* he thought, outraged.

Then he noticed the windows were shut and the curtains pulled to and tacked down so as not to stir.

*Okay, it's been at least a day then. Is it Saturday or Sunday?*

Although his right arm was still mobile, it was starting to ache more and more. He let it fall limp at his side, but the doxy bite still burned. The growing numbness on his left side was even more alarming.

*I should have tried to run or even fight. Having the Ministry show up to snap my wand would be preferable to getting beaten to death. I just thought he'd stop after the first few punches like before.*

Harry reached around with his right hand and dug his fingers between the mattress and the box-frame. He sighed as his fingers brushed the smooth wooden shaft of his wand.

*I can just cast several spells in quick succession, he thought blearily. That ought to bring someone running. And if Vernon objects to the owls, I'll just hex him.*

The tip of the wand, however, got caught on something as Harry pulled it out, and the wand slipped out his fingers and rolled under the bed. From the rattling sounds, it had rolled a good distance as well. Harry sighed.

*I just can't catch a break, can I?* he thought in a rare burst of self-pity.

He thought momentarily about climbing down after it, but his left side was mostly dead weight by now. He took a shallow breath and blew it out. He was going to have to hope the Weasley brothers were still coming to check on him. Hopefully the bars on the windows would be a tip off for them. Aside from being in large amounts of pain, Harry was disturbed at how badly things had spiralled out of control. He'd shown too much anger or independence last summer, and he'd tried to play it too softly this summer. Vernon had never hurt him this badly before, and he was starting to wonder how much damage had actually been done. Wizards were supposed to be more physically resilient than Muggles, but the creeping paralysis on his left side suggested something was getting worse.

He was also hungry, and incredibly thirsty. He also really needed to use the loo. It didn't look like any of those issues were going to be addressed any time soon.

Harry wasn't aware of drifting off, but when he looked at the window again, it appeared to be dark outside. He knew time had passed because his left hand and foot were completely numb, and the pins and needles were creeping up his arm and leg. There appeared to be something wet under his neck, but he couldn't tell for sure. The bite on his right forearm was starting to smell rather badly. When he sniffed at it, he also realized that he'd lost control of certain bodily functions as well.

That was when Harry started to wonder if he was dying.

That thought made his heart race. There was still too much to do. Voldemort was still out there, and it was just a matter of time before he returned. He tried to concentrate in what he needed to do. Could he try to Apparate somewhere for help? He thought about the lobby at St. Mungo's. The questions they would ask didn't matter if he wasn't going to be here to fix things otherwise. Even trusting the Ministry was better than nothing. He tried to picture the hospital's lobby in his mind, but his thoughts were too fuzzy. He could barely feel his magic at this point.

He reached up, ever so slowly, and slid the fingers of his right hand under the pillow. His body felt like it was cast from solid lead. He wanted little more than to never have to move again. He pulled the scarf Ginny made him out from under the pillow, or at least one end of it.

He held it to his face and tried to wait.

Darkness claimed him again.

Harry's eyes cracked open when he heard a loud crunching sound. A sudden draft in the dank, stifling air chilled the sweat beaded on Harry's face. His eyes had swollen so much he could barely open them, but his ears were relatively fine.

He could hear the idling of a car's engine.

"Are you sure—"

"-- we have the right address?"

"-- and we didn't just—"

"--rip the bars--"

"--off some innocent Muggle's house?"

“Shut it, you two. You said this was number four, so this is where Harry lives. We could see the people behind the other windows and those weren’t Harry.”

“Whatever you say—“

“—ickle Ronniekins.”

“Look, there’s Hedwig. That’s his owl. We got the right place. Harry?” Ron called.

Harry tried to speak, but the best he could manage was a whispering groan. Through his slitted eyes, he could barely make out someone standing over him.

“Merlin, Harry, what did they do to you?” the shadow asked in a shocked whisper.

“Ron?” Harry croaked, a little louder this time. His throat was so dry it felt like it was lined with gravel.

“Get his things,” another voice said. It sounded like one of the twins.

“I’m looking. Got his mail. And his owl. Where’s his trunk?”

“Harry?” Ron said leaning over him. “Where is your school trunk? We’re going to get you out of here, mate.”

“Under stairs... wand is... under bed.”

“Right, I’ll get that. Fred, look under the stairs for his trunk. And stay quiet.”

“Half a mo’, Ron. Got to pick this lock,” one of the twins called.

There was a creak as the bedroom door slowly opened.

The shadow reappeared, leaning closely over Harry. “I’ve got your wand,” Ron whispered. “When they get your trunk we’re out of here. Is there anything else?”

“Water,” Harry croaked as he blinked some secretions out of his eyes and could see a little better.

“Right,” Ron grunted before he disappeared again, returning with the water glass from the lavatory. Harry tried to lever himself up on his right arm, but couldn’t even begin to shift himself.

“Hold still,” Ron said. “You’re messed up pretty bad.” He poured half the glass into the water dish on Hedwig’s cage and then carefully held the lip of the glass up to Harry’s mouth. Harry slowly drank the remainder in tiny sips. Nothing he’d drunk before had ever tasted so good.

“Got his trunk,” said the hoarse whisper from the door.

“Right then; get that lot stowed and get the back doors open,” Ron hissed as he stood over Harry. He took the scarf trailing off the edge of Harry’s bed, rolled it up and shoved it into his pocket. He looked down, frowning.

“Okay, everything’s in—“

“- let’s get Harry up on his feet.”

Ron held his hand out against the twins as he pulled out his wand and pointed it at Harry. “*Mobilicorpus*” he said in a low voice. Harry felt a sigh of relief as his body lifted, weightless, from the bed.

“Bloody hell, Ron —“

“-- we agreed—“

“ -- that there would be no magic!”

“We’re really going to be—“

“In for it now!”

“Shut it, you two,” Ron growled as he levitated Harry over to the window. “He’s hurt bad. I’m half afraid to even move him at all, but I’m not leaving him a minute longer with those Muggles.”

Ron was very careful manoeuvring Harry into the back seat. Still there were a few jars that brought tears to his eyes and nearly made him black out. Fortunately the back seat expanded enough for Harry to be stretched out. Ron spread a woolly blanket over him that smelled a bit like mothballs.

Harry was still in a lot of pain, and felt truly wretched, but at least he knew he wasn't going to die in that room.

"Do you think we should fly him straight to St. Mungo's?" Ron asked

"Do you know the way?"

"-- because we don't."

"Let's get him to Mum. If she can't help him, she can use the Floo," Ron suggested.

He drifted off a few minutes later, but woke again when they touched down.

"Have you any idea how worried I've been?" he heard a woman's voice that started low and built to an impressive volume. "Out all night! Not a note or anything! You all could have crashed, you—"

"Mum! Yell at me all you like, but take a look at Harry first! He's in a bad way," Ron shouted.

Harry was dimly aware of the back door being opened. A stout figure was silhouetted in the early morning light. He heard a gasp as the blanket was pulled away.

"Boys, get inside and stay inside. Keep an eye on your sister."

He felt a soft hand touch his shoulder and then groaned as a sudden jerk whisked him away.

Molly Weasley couldn't ever remember being so worried about her children before. She'd worked herself into quite a state by the time she saw the Ford Anglia coming in for a landing next to the shed. The

twins had always been a bit wild, but this was bad even for them. And to involve Ron was even worse.

The looks on their faces were uncharacteristically grim, and she had a feeling they were in even worse trouble than she knew. So she was a little dumbfounded when Ron interrupted her, which he never did when getting a lecture. The sick expression on his face was enough to make her stop and open the car door.

She almost became physically ill. Ron's best friend had been beaten to a pulp, and from the smells coming from inside the car, had been left like that for several days. She pulled back the blanket and saw the massive swelling and bruising on the side of the boy's neck. That made up her mind. She sent the boys inside and gently gripped Harry's shoulder. The boy's emerald green eyes flickered open and she Apparated them both to St. Mungo's lobby.

Normally Molly Weasley hated to Apparate. It always made her a bit queasy, so she much preferred Flooing. Side-along Apparating was noticeably harder on her, so she took a moment to get her bearings. By that time, several healers were swarming over Harry. Their jargon was highly technical, but by the tone of their voices she knew his injuries were quite serious. When one mentioned informing the Auror on duty, Molly asked where the closest Floo could be found.

"Ma'am, we'd like you to stay around. There's going to be some questions they'll need answered."

"I just need to call my husband; I have no intention of abandoning that boy," she said firmly. The healer directed her to a sitting room just off the lobby.

Molly dug into her apron and dropped a Knut into the bowl next to Floo powder. She took the smallest pinch she could and tossed it into the fire. When the flames burned green she stated, "Misuse of Muggle Artefacts office. Arthur, are you there?"

After a moment, he husband's head appeared in the fire. "I'm almost finished up here. We had nine raids tonight and the paperwork is incredible. Can you believe Mundungus Fletcher tried to hex me? I don't think he was serious about it, but really!"



Molly let out a sigh. "Arthur, Ron and the twins went ahead and got Harry."

"Got him? But how? Oh no, they didn't use the...?"

"They did, but that's not important right now. I'm at St. Mungo's with Harry right now."

"With Harry?"

Molly pressed her lips together. Her husband had been up all night, so it wouldn't do to get impatient with him now. "Arthur, if we'd waited until Friday to look in on him, I don't think he would have made it," she said with a hint of bitterness. She hadn't wanted to believe Ron when he talked about "those horrid Muggles" and neither had her husband. She was just glad her sons had shown more initiative. "I think the Aurors are going to want to talk to them about how they found Harry. Could you swing by The Burrow and collect them? Ginny can stay with the Lovegoods, I suppose. He has a daughter her age."

Her husband's expression was grim, but he nodded and the flames went back to normal.

When she returned to the lobby, the receptionist directed her to one of the treatment rooms. Outside the door was a tall black man with a shaved head and a gold hoop earring in one ear. His robes were conservatively cut, made of a blue fabric that was almost black.

He nodded at Molly and extended his hand. "Kingsley Shacklebolt, Ma'am. I understand you brought the boy in?"

"Yes, well, my sons found him," Molly said, feeling oddly proud.

"Where was that?" He'd taken out a small book and was writing in it now.

"I suppose rescued him is more accurate. He lives with his guardians, his aunt and uncle." She sniffed. "I didn't quite believe Ron when he went on about how horrible those Muggles were to him."

Kingsley had stopped writing to stare at her. "You mean his aunt and uncle did this to him?"

Molly swallowed as her stomach rolled over. "Yes, I think they did. We hadn't heard from him for a while, and my boys got worried and went to fetch him." She noticed the Auror's eyes hadn't left her face for a moment. "My husband is going to collect the boys now. I didn't want to wait for the Floo, he -- he was hurt so badly." Molly struggled to suppress her tears.

*Why didn't we check sooner?* She asked herself for the tenth time.

"I'll need to talk to them as soon as they arrive," Auror Shackbolt said smoothly.

The door to the sitting room opened and Arthur walked out followed by Fred, George, Ron, and Ginny. Arthur wouldn't meet her eyes.

As the Auror began talking to the boys, Molly pulled her husband aside. She glanced at her daughter. Ginny watched the proceedings silently, but her eyes were wide with shock. "What is *she* doing here," she whispered.

"She already knew, Molly," Arthur whispered back. "She heard the boys return and got the whole story from them. She was in quite a state and refused to be left anywhere."

"Arthur, this isn't a good place for her to be -- he's, well he's --"

"Been beaten half to death, the ways the boys described it," Arthur said with a sigh. "She was just as upset as you are. I couldn't leave her with someone else right now. Percy volunteered to stay at home in case any owls come."

"I suppose it's for the best," Molly sighed. She knew her husband would not be able to refuse his little girl's tears.

"If everything is under control here, I need to make another trip." Arthur said suddenly.

Molly frowned. Her husband's expression had gone very grim. An expression her own mum had called fighting mad. She couldn't recall seeing him this angry since the war. "Arthur, where are you going?" she said softly.

"I need to talk to Albus," he said and began walking toward the sitting room entrance. Molly let out a sigh and walked over to her youngest and smoothed a wandering strand of hair off of her forehead.

Arthur Weasley was an easy going man by nature. He didn't want to go through life snarling at everyone who stepped on his toes or inadvertently jostled him. Some people thought that meant he had no backbone. He knew some of his colleagues at the Ministry thought he was a bit hen-pecked.

He just preferred to save his anger for truly deserving targets.

He hadn't even seen Harry. He didn't need to. Listening to his wife and children occasionally talk about him around the dinner table painted enough of a portrait. He knew his youngest son felt a bit overshadowed by his older siblings, but was surprised he didn't have much envy for the Boy Who Lived's wealth or fame. Instead, he tended to fret about his friend's safety. True, the boy did tend to get in more than his fair share of scrapes, but Arthur was still proud of his son's loyalty.

Talking to his sons briefly this morning painted a far different portrait. There was a hollow look in their eyes that took him a moment to identify, at least until he thought back to the war. A piece of their innocence was gone forever after seeing what had been done to their friend; by his own blood relatives.

Arthur had always been fascinated by Muggles. When he was a lad, he'd been amazed that people could even survive without magic. When he attended Hogwarts, he signed up for the first Muggle Studies class that had ever been taught. He was amazed by the ways they used technology to do things that Wizarding folk always took for granted. Other than their handicaps with regard to magic, he'd always thought of them as being just like regular people.

But what kind of people would do that to a child? To their own flesh and blood? It was unthinkable to him, and he found himself thinking in ways he didn't like. Were Muggles really not that different? Or had he been deluding himself?

Arthur closed the door to the waiting room and took a deep breath. Once out of sight of his wife and family he sat down for a moment in one of the chairs. He rubbed at his eyes and yawned softly. He'd been up all night, and his mind wasn't at its clearest. There were no doubt magical families that did just as badly, if not worse. He couldn't judge all Muggles on the behaviour of the few, no matter how angry he was. He really needed some sleep, but he had too much to do before he could rest. With a sigh he heaved himself out of the far too comfortable chair and walked over to the fireplace.

When the fire burned green, he stepped forward saying "Three Broomsticks," in a clear voice.

Arthur used the walk from Hogsmeade to the castle to both wake up and to organize his thoughts. The sun stung his eyes, but the cool morning air was invigorating.

When he entered the Great Hall, he found the professors were just finishing their breakfast.

"Mr. Weasley, what brings you here so early?" The headmaster's eyes showed only a little surprise.

"If I could have a moment of your time, Professor?"

Arthur could feel the man's eyes taking in his expression and signs of fatigue. "Certainly," he said as he pushed back from the table. The old man led them up to his office without another word. Soon they were seating and Arthur shook his head at the offered lemon drop.

"What is this about, Arthur?" Dumbledore asked quietly.

"Well, it has to do with Harry Potter, and his relatives," Arthur answered calmly.

The old man looked at him for a moment. Arthur imagined this was not a direction he expected the conversation to go in. "I know your youngest son is friends with the boy, and Harry has expressed that he doesn't get along well with his relatives, but I assure you..."

"Doesn't get along? Albus, are you mad?" Arthur had to stop himself from shouting the words. "The boy was beaten half to death! He's at St. Mungo's right now, but if my sons hadn't broken half a dozen laws going to check on him he would be dead by now."

Arthur had known Dumbledore for many years, but he'd never seen him at a loss for words before. After a moment, the old wizard seemed to gather himself. "It simply isn't possible," he whispered. He turned abruptly and consulted one of the silvery instruments that lined his shelves. "No one has disturbed the protections on their house and its inhabitants," he said out loud, frowning.

"Albus, I'm telling you, this wasn't done by some outsiders, it was them. He'd been hurt days ago, and they just left him on that bed."

The professor looked up at him. "Harry has... let his feelings be known to me about his treatment at the Dursleys. I took it upon myself to pay a visit to his uncle at his workplace. I discovered that things were not going at all well, both due to some things that had been said, and because Mr. Dursley holds a great contempt for anything he does not consider normal. I... took steps to ensure Harry's safety this summer, but something appears to have gone dreadfully wrong."

Arthur stared at the man who led him and others in the fight against Voldemort during the last war. "You used a Memory Charm on him, didn't you?"

"I am not proud of doing that, but it was necessary to keep Harry safe during the time he is not at Hogwarts, especially now that he is garnering attention again in the Wizarding world. There are extensive protections around the Dursleys and their home."

"Could someone else have sought out Harry's uncle at his job like you did? Could he have been put under the Imperius curse?"

Dumbledore glanced at his instruments again. "No. Someone casting a curse at him, let alone an Unforgivable Curse, would have been detected." The professor paused, staring off into space.

"What if they used magic, but not a curse," Arthur asked slowly. "What would happen if someone suddenly removed your charm?"

Dumbledore let out a sigh. For a moment, he looked old and almost... defeated.

Arthur felt a stab of pity but ignored it. "Right," he said suddenly. "Well, I think it's clear that is no longer a safe place for the boy."

"You are correct," Dumbledore agreed carefully. "Perhaps a guard can be assigned there to keep watch on him directly."

"You misunderstand me, Albus," Arthur said coldly. "That boy cannot return to such an environment. It is neither safe nor healthy, and it's a bloody wonder he isn't unbalanced."

"Arthur, they are his legal guardians. There are laws that must be obeyed."

"There's an Auror taking depositions from my sons now. I'm going to talk to Amelia Bones when I get done here and I doubt there will be any difficulty in scheduling a custody hearing. One I doubt the Dursleys will even bother to attend. Until then he will stay with us-- That is, after he's released from hospital."

The headmaster had gone very still. "I don't think that would be advisable."

"Your notion of the proper home life for a twelve year old boy leaves a lot to be desired," Arthur replied in a formal tone he normally reserved for legal hearings. "If you wish to force the issue, we can always get the press involved."

"You realize what that kind of publicity would do to the Muggle Protection Act, don't you?"

"I've spent six months trying to get that passed into law. I am fully aware that my efforts would all be for naught if the public found out that the Boy Who Lived was beaten by his Muggle relatives. I also remember being lectured about how we always have a choice between doing what is easy and what is right." Albus stared at him and Arthur felt a little guilty. He'd followed this Wizarding legend unquestioningly during the war, who was he to question the man's judgment now? Arthur straightened in his seat. Several people at St. Mungo's were depending on him to do the right thing and he wasn't going to let them down. That's who he was.

"There have been a lot of incidents lately," the headmaster said in a resigned tone. "There are things going on that I do not completely understand, and some of them appear to revolve around young Harry Potter. I hope you do not come to regret your decision."

"The only thing I regret is not acting sooner," Arthur said as he got up from his chair.

Harry awoke and was surprised to find he was free of pain. At least relatively free anyway. He could barely move his left hand, but that was a vast improvement over the numbness he'd experienced earlier. All he could see was a white expanse of ceiling overhead. He tried to look down, but his neck wouldn't bend. It took a moment to realize there was a large poultice wrapped around his neck and pressing against his jaw bone.

"Ah, he's awake, Healer Stanhope."

A middle-aged man with grey hair and kind-looking eyes entered Harry's field of vision. "Ah. Try to rest, Harry. You've had a rough go of things and you need to give the potions time to work."

"Neck hurts," Harry croaked. He was embarrassed but grateful when a straw was brought to his lips. He took a long sip as the healer nodded.

"Yes, you are undoubtedly dehydrated. Your worst injury was a blow to the neck. There was some nerve damage, but you should eventually recover. Just try to rest now. You have another dose to

take in two hours, so you have time for a nap.” Harry felt a hand pat his shoulder and then the face left.

The lights were dimmed, but Harry didn't feel like sleeping. If he was physically capable of it, he would have kicked himself. He'd badly underestimated Vernon's rage. He remembered the first time he'd lived through that day - Aunt Petunia had swung a frying pan at his head after he startled Dudley. But this time his uncle had nearly killed him. One or two casual blows were usually it when Vernon got enraged, but instead, this time he'd struck him as hard as he could, breaking bones. By the time Harry realized the man was serious, he was too injured to defend himself.

Harry knew he wasn't just guilty of underestimating his uncle's anger. He'd been expecting things to happen just like before, as long as he didn't take steps to change them. He expected Vernon to just lock him in his room like last time, ignoring the warning signs from his harsher welcome home. His foreknowledge had given him an easy victory over Quirrell at the end of the term. But now he'd grown overly dependent on it and nearly died for it.

As angry as he was at the Dursleys, Harry was even angrier at himself. His stupidity had nearly got himself killed. He was trying too hard to march in lockstep with everyone's expectations, terrified of raising Dumbledore or Snape's suspicions. Trying to maintain a lower profile and not forfeit the protection of his mother's last magic had nearly got him killed. And without him, Voldemort would eventually have free reign. Most of the people he cared about would not last long under such a regime.

Hell, using his wand and hexing his uncle might have been better. His wand wouldn't have been snapped without at least a hearing... though he wondered if he would have been believed without resorting to Veritaserum. The wrong question put to him while under its effects would result in him never leaving the Ministry building again.

The what-ifs began to multiply and run riot in his mind, so Harry took a deep breath and closed his eyes tried to rest. Instead, something he'd read in one of his psychology books was troubling him. He'd felt some guilt in the future for the death of the Dursley family. Was his



reluctance to handle things more aggressively some bizarre attempt at penance? Was he hoping that Vernon wouldn't prove to be as big a bastard this time around?

It wasn't pleasant, pondering if one had a self destructive streak in one's nature.

In the end, Harry gave it up as a bad job. He'd been stupid and he simply wasn't going to do that again. In the future, if it came down to preserving the status quo or preserving himself, he'd say to hell with the consequences.

Harry closed his eyes and tried to sleep.

A/N

Wow, I had an idea the last chapter would raise a little controversy, and I was right. In retrospect, I might have merged chapter 10 and 11, rather than leave the mini-cliffie. (On the other hand, that would also have delayed the update. Do you prefer smaller chapters as fast as you can get them, or rather have me wait three days and post a bigger one? Last time I ran this survey, no one really had an opinion.)

Anyway, it should be clear now that Harry did, in fact, badly misread the situation. He has four main worries, and Voldemort is not the most immediate of those. In no particular order, they are:

One, making sure he doesn't blow his cover.

Two, helping his friends realize their potential and be ready for what is to come.

Three, figuring out how to neutralize Voldemort before he kills everyone

Four, not disrupting the sequence of events so much that his foreknowledge becomes useless.

Number four is becoming a lost cause, and Harry is finally starting to realize it. He repeated his reasons to himself as he left the Knight Bus, but now he knows that even the subtle changes (like complaining to

Dumbledore, though he doesn't know it yet, and punching out Malfoy) have spawned their own consequences and his foreknowledge has already been compromised. He's going to have to start figuring things out for himself more and rely on his memories less. If you had a choice between working to problems on a test or using the answer key, which would you prefer? Harry just got caught out when somebody changed the questions.

Other issues:

If detection of under-aged magic is done by a charm placed on the wand, then why did Dobby levitating the pudding result in Harry getting a warning? As far as wards that block magic detection – okay. But how would Harry be able to cast it (assuming he found out how) without that casting being detected? Also, since Dumbledore knows about and/or monitors the wards around the Dursley house, he just might notice someone adding a new one.

(NOTE: Someone since pointed out where it is described. So my assumption was correct – it is location based, so the “removing the tracking charms” schtick people like to use in fanfiction is invalid.)

The Dursleys cannot be described in any way other than abusive, even though JKR doesn't focus much on that in the books. Petunia's frying pan swing at Harry's head is called 'assault with a deadly weapon' at best and 'attempted murder' where I come from. Either one involving a minor results in all kinds of people coming to pay you a visit. Withholding food as a punishment for misbehavior (one cup of soup in two days) went out with Oliver Twist.

Harry has not received the letter from Goldfarb yet. Buying up stock in a privately held company is not always a quick process. Also, he's been having this problem with his owl post lately...

Remember, Harry didn't really defeat Voldemort in the first book. He defeated Quirrell and robbed Voldemort of his host. (And thwarted the theft.) This time around, Harry let Fluffy do most of the work. Quirrell was really badly hurt by the time Harry disarmed him. One stinging hex in the right place and the right time can work wonders, eh? That's why relying on his foreknowledge is so seductive.

Harry getting the Muggle Child Protective services involved would have been a mess for even more reasons than detailed above, many of them revolving around the Statute of Secrecy and where Harry spends nine months out of the year.

Despite it becoming a Hogwarts Legend, I doubt Harry or Ron will be terribly sorry if they avoid that whole Whomping Willow business. That was an extremely loud howler.

Yes, I hate Vernon too. And technically, I've already killed him once in this story.

Unicorn - Vernon's initial reaction to Harry staring at him was based on superstitions about 'the evil eye' – or witches hexing someone by staring at them. Breaking eye contact was supposed to be one way of stopping it.

Martial arts or not, Harry is twelve. A twelve year old black belt fighting an adult twice his size, and four times his weight, and giving the adult a couple of free shots, is going to be too hurt to defend himself effectively. Harry did try to block the kick to his face, but got his arm broken. That neck hit did some serious damage.

Harry was being quiet in his room for the same reasons he kept shushing Dobby in canon. The Dursleys were having a dinner party downstairs and he wanted to avoid trouble if he could. The threat of Hedwig being blinded or killed was what made him forget everything else and pull out his wand.

Again, Harry did not use magic in self defense because a) he didn't think the beating would be that severe and b) getting the Dursleys hauled off would blow the wards and result in a severe deviation from the timeline. And yes, he did read the situation wrong. He's not infallible, just like when he forgot Sirius' magic mirror.

In canon, Harry was in the kitchen when the owl arrived and dropped the letter in the living room. For whatever reasons, it decided to leave the owl with the adults of the house in canon, and did so here as well. I imagine it would be preferable for those kinds of messages anyway... would you trust the child who got in trouble to let its parents know about it?

.XX  
XXXXXX.

Like I said, I sort of expected chapter ten to raise some eyebrows. People don't like it when heroes do stupid things, even if there are reasons. But merged-Harry isn't infallible, and it would probably be a **really** boring story if he was, eh?

-Matthew

## Chapter 12

When Harry awoke, he was asked to drink several potions in quick succession. The fact that he could now safely drink normal restorative potions would accelerate his recovery, Healer Stanhope informed him cheerfully.

Helpful or not, the potions also put him out like a lamp.

When he awoke again, he had visitors. He also had a wide variety of sensations passing through his body. Not the least of these was the needles-poking-through-my-flesh feeling he associated with Skele-Gro potions. That was currently running through his forearm, several ribs, and just a hint was emanating from the back of his neck. The muscles of his stomach and abdomen were extremely tender and even breathing seemed to stretch them intolerably. At least that bulky poultice was off his neck. While still bandaged, he could turn his head a little now.

It was when he was testing this that he saw his visitors. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were sitting next to the bed. Mrs. Weasley had a copy of *Witch's Weekly* in her hands while Mr. Weasley was dozing with his head propped up on one hand.

Mrs. Weasley looked up and her eyes widened. "Arthur," she whispered, nudging her husband. "Hello, Harry," she said brightly. "You're looking a lot better. This is my husband, Arthur."

Harry felt a little odd, being introduced to a man he'd grown so close to before he died. Fortunately, his emotions wouldn't be that obvious surrounded by a sea of discomfort. "Hello," he rasped, and grimaced.

Mrs. Weasley began fussing with the water glass, but this time Harry was able to use his right hand, though there was a bandage wrapped around his forearm. After a sip, he made a face. The inside of his mouth tasted like an old boot. "I guess they had some doxy antivenin," he said.

Mrs. Weasley smiled. "You're at St. Mungo's, so I imagine so. One of the healers recognized the bite marks right off."

Harry nodded. He'd been worried the wound sat untreated too long. "I wish I knew who sent them," he muttered.

Mrs. Weasley frowned and Mr. Weasley excused himself. "Arthur is going to go fetch the Auror, dear. We agreed when they let us sit with you that we'd let them know first thing when you woke up."

The door reopened after a moment and Mr. Weasley was followed by a tall black man that Harry immediately recognized.

"Hello, Mr. Potter," he said in his deep voice, "I'm Kingsley Shacklebolt, I'm here to ask you some questions about your injuries, if you're feeling up to it."

Harry nodded and smiled. Kingsley had taught him more about duelling than most of his Defence teachers.

He'd also forgotten how perceptive the Auror was when the man frowned. "Have we met before, Mr. Potter?" he asked.

Harry's smile widened in embarrassment. He needed to redirect the man's curiosity. "Sorry. You, er, remind me of this Muggle actor..."

Kingsley smiled. "Ah, Samuel L. Jackson. Don't worry, I consider it a compliment. He's not a bad looking bloke." He glanced over at the Weasleys. "If you'll excuse us?" he asked.

As Mrs. Weasley rose from her chair, Harry spoke up. "You, er, can stay, if you like. Ron and the twins got in trouble for rescuing me; it's only fair you know why."

"Are you sure, Harry?" she asked.

Harry nodded and they all sat down.

"All right Harry," Kingsley began, taking out his little book. "Start where you feel most comfortable."

Harry took a deep breath and told them pretty much everything that happened on his birthday, with the exception of his conversation with Dobby. He only indicated that an un-named house elf admitted he'd

been holding Harry's mail, but Harry persuaded the rogue elf to finally give it over.

"Someone sent you a box of doxies for your birthday?" Molly was outraged, but subsided when Kingsley looked at her.

Harry nodded. "I managed to kill two, but not before being bitten. Hedwig got one, but the last one was just about to blind her, so I had to use my wand to kill it."

Kingsley nodded thoughtfully, but just waited for Harry to continue.

Talking about Vernon's reaction was harder. He was angry at himself for letting things get that far, but he supposed it just appeared that he was angry at his uncle instead. He also let them think he was simply afraid to raise his wand against his uncle. The real reasons were a bit more complicated. By the time he was done describing Ron and the twins' arrival he was glaring down at his blanket. The room was dead silent, and he realized that Mrs. Weasley was holding his hand.

After a long moment, Kingsley spoke up. "Mr. Potter, when my report is complete, I will be forwarding a copy to the Surrey Area Child Protection Committee with a recommendation for immediate prosecution. There will likely be a closed hearing at the Ministry scheduled after you are released to determine your legal status within the Wizarding world. I will also see Mrs. Hopkirk about having this warning removed from your record. The self-defence clause more than covers this."

"Sir, will the Weasleys get in trouble for the, well, you know?"

"Ronald's use of magic was in preventing further injury. I've already seen to that. As for the means of transportation," at this he paused and grinned at Mr. Weasley, whose ears were turning red. "I'm afraid that's out of my jurisdiction. In any event, my report focuses on what happened before they got there. I will go start the paperwork, but I believe these two would like to talk to you." With that, the tall Auror stood up, nodded once to Harry, and left the room with a determined stride.

Harry looked over at the Weasleys, who were both suddenly hesitant. "Harry, dear," Molly began. "We were wondering if you'd mind coming to stay with us for a bit. At least until your hearing; Ron and Ginny and the rest are very worried about you, and I know they'd like to see you."

"We almost had to have them forcibly removed from the waiting area while you were unconscious. And we had to lock up the Floo powder," Arthur said with a rueful smile.

"I, well, I'd like that," Harry said quietly. "I just don't want to be an imposition. I mean, I can always get a room at the Leaky Cauldron, you know."

"You will do no such thing!" Molly gasped, outraged. Harry jumped a little in surprise, but she squeezed his hand in reassurance. "You're just barely twelve years old, Harry. You can't live by yourself, who'd watch out for you?"

Mr. Weasley spoke up. "Molly does have a point, Harry. The law will not allow you to live alone at your age without a legal guardian."

Harry frowned but nodded. "I'd like that," he said quietly.

Mrs. Weasley gave her husband a look.

Mr. Weasley cleared his throat. "Well, while we're on the subject. Harry, would you object if we applied to become your legal guardians?"

Harry was quite certain his heart just stopped.

Misinterpreting Harry's expression, Mr. Weasley began speaking very quickly. "It would only be until you were, seventeen, you know, legal age. If there's anyone else you'd prefer, we understand though."

Harry was shaking his head. "No, there isn't. I just don't... I mean you don't have to do this."

"No Harry, we don't." Mr. Weasley agreed. "I think Professor Dumbledore will likely have some alternatives lined up by the date of



the hearing. That would probably mean you could live at Hogwarts year round if you wanted.”

“Harry,” Mrs. Weasley said, “we’re asking because we want you to come live with us.”

Objectively, Harry realized he shouldn’t have been too surprised, not when they were sitting there waiting for him to wake up. Subjectively, he couldn’t believe it. Somewhere inside of him was a thirty year old Harry thinking how much easier it would be to protect them at The Burrow, and how much studying he could get done over the summers if he didn’t have to hide his books. Somewhere inside of him was an eleven year old Harry who was amazed that someone actually wanted him. All of this was wrapped up inside a newly-twelve-year-old Harry who realized he’d never been this happy before. He opened his mouth and closed it and suddenly he was being hugged by Mrs. Weasley.

Harry could remember that happening before, when he was racked with guilt following the Tri-Wizard tournament. He’d been about to go spare then, and he wasn’t far from that now. He tried to calm his breathing, which was starting to hitch. When he relaxed, Mrs. Weasley let go and sat back in her chair, dabbing at her eyes.

Harry steeled himself for what he needed to say. “I’d like that,” he said in a small voice, “but I’m afraid there are a couple of conditions.” The Weasleys stared at him, and Harry saw a ghost of a frown on Mrs. Weasley’s face. “I – I mean. Well, my parents left me some money, for school and, and other things.”

Molly shook her head. “That’s your money, dear.”

“I, well -- you already have a family. I wouldn’t feel right if I didn’t... help out some.”

Mrs. Weasley opened her mouth, but her husband put his hand on her arm and shook his head.

“Harry, that’s very nice of you to offer,” Mr. Weasley said. “But we didn’t even know about your inheritance when we made our decision to ask you. You really don’t have to do this.”

"I know that, Mr. Weasley," Harry replied, working to keep his voice even. "That's why I want to."

Eventually, Harry wore them down. Hospital beds do have some uses after all.

Mrs. Weasley got a little emotional toward the end. "Harry, we didn't offer this to get at your money," she said bluntly.

"I know," Harry said. "The Dursleys never had a clue about it. They thought I got my school books from Public Relief."

Mrs. Weasley bit her lip but subsided. "What was your other condition, Harry?" Mr. Weasley asked.

"Well," Harry began. This was probably the tougher one. What he was saying would constitute a direct threat to their family, and he didn't think they'd react well to that at all. "You know what happened when I was a baby."

They both nodded, not looking like they knew where this was going.

"From what I understand," Harry continued. "There are quite a few people who'd like to see me dead." Mrs. Weasley flinched. "From what Professor Dumbledore has implied, there were special protections placed around my aunt and uncle's house to keep it safe. My presence will put your family in danger, specifically from Voldemort and his allies."

Mrs. Weasley twitched again at the name, but Mr. Weasley just met Harry's gaze calmly. "Harry, the Weasleys were not quiet in our opposition to Voldemort in the last war. If he and his kind were to return to power, we'd be in just as much danger."

Harry nodded. "That may be true, but my being at The Burrow would definitely move it up their priority list. I'd like to see about upgrading the security at The Burrow at my expense. I can talk to Goldfarb, who manages the Potter Trust at Gringotts and see whether he can legally justify withdrawing money for that purpose."

Mr. Weasley nodded. "If it would make you feel safer, Harry."

"It would," Harry agreed. *And make me feel better that you are all safer.*

"This is only for new wards and such, correct?" Mrs. Weasley asked.

"Or any additions of a defensive nature," Harry temporized.

Mr. Weasley gave Harry a piercing look. Mrs. Weasley was shaking her head in resignation so Harry gave him a quick wink. Mr. Weasley looked a little dubious, but patted his wife on the arm. "Come on, Molly. We've tired the boy out enough." As his wife collected her things and headed out the door, Mr. Weasley took Harry's hand.

"I'm sorry, Harry," he said in a quiet undertone.

"For what, sir?"

"If I'd listened to Ron and Ginny, we'd have been out there days earlier," he said, chagrined.

"You didn't know," Harry said. "Nothing too bad happened until last Friday."

"You're being uncommonly generous."

"It's over now, and maybe I won't ever have to see them again. Anyway, I'm just glad I've got a home to look forward to." He smiled shyly at his best friend's father.

The man chuckled. "You haven't even seen The Burrow before, have you?"

"No, but it's the people that make the home, don't they? And I know most of the Weasleys already." Harry's grin was infectious now. Arthur Weasley smiled back, though his eyes were a little wide. He followed his wife out the door, but not before giving Harry an odd look.

It took Harry a moment to realize that he'd just repeated one of Arthur Weasley's favourite sayings back to him.

After a relatively peaceful night, which made Harry ever so grateful for the dreamless sleep potions they finally gave him, he awoke to find Healer Stanhope taking the bandage off his right arm. The doxy bite had been left untreated for days, and the poison had done enough damage to leave a frightful scar. It looked like a shallow spoonful of flesh had been removed from his forearm, which is pretty much what happened.

"The tissue had gone necrotic, so we had to excise a good bit to ensure no further necrosis or putrefaction occurred."

"I understand what all those words mean, you know," Harry complained, turning a little green.

"Oh? Pity, that. I usually skate by using technical terms when people want to know what happened. Most of them don't really, not in any detail. They just feel like they should ask," the grey-haired healer confided.

Harry ignored that. He peered at the fierce-looking scar. The edges of it were raised and angry, like puffy little hedge rows on his skin.

"Lads your age usually like to have a good scar or two. Builds character, you know. And you get to make up stories about how you got them!"

Harry looked up at the healer and quirked an eyebrow. "I'd rather have a lot of stories no one believes. He rolled his eyes upward to indicate the infamous lightning-shaped scar on his forehead."

Healer Stanhope reddened when he made the connection. "Yes, well. Quite. Skele-Gro aches all gone?"

Harry nodded slowly, pleased that his neck had stopped hurting.

"Feeling back in all your extremities?"

This time Harry grimaced. He still had pins and needles in his left hand and foot, along with spots of numbness.

Stanhope didn't ask for elaboration. Instead he pulled out his wand and ran it over Harry's left side. "I see -- still a bit of mending to be done; you'll be with us for a couple more days, Mr. Boy Who Lived."

Harry started when he heard his famous sobriquet.

"Ah yes, I should warn you that your identity did eventually slip out after the Aurors left. Security has had to throw out four reporters already. They haven't had this much fun since Celestina Warbeck was checked in for acute laryngitis."

Harry made a disgusted face.

"Don't worry," Stanhope said, his voice serious now. "We take patient confidentiality very seriously here. The orderly that said they saw you on the patient roster was sacked on the spot. No one knows any details, which is what's driving those vultures absolutely mad."

Harry let out a sigh of relief. "Will the nerves completely recover? And how long will it take?"

"A couple of days more on the nerve-restoring potions. After that you may have some intermittent weakness for a couple of months. You should be fine in plenty of time for Quidditch."

Harry jumped. "How did you—"

"I was sorted into Gryffindor, and I still keep up with the cup scores. I even played chaser back in the day."

"Wow, did they have balls back then? Or were they still using rocks for Bludgers?" Harry asked sarcastically.

Healer Stanhope blinked and chuckled. "I supposed I have been winding you up a bit, haven't I?"

Privately, Harry thought the healer's eyes were a little too calculating. *Was he testing me to see if I was traumatized or still had a sense of humour?* He wondered.

“Anyway,” the healer continued. “I wanted to discuss some of your test results, since you are awake and sufficiently aware to mock my age and experience. First, I have a question. Have you experienced any unusual bursts of magic recently? Or at all?”

“Well,” Harry said carefully. “I have had a couple of bits of accidental magic over the past year.”

“Really, these happened after you started attending Hogwarts?”

Harry nodded.

“Well, I suppose that would account for... anyway. To explain before you jump up and throttle me. When you were admitted, we did a Magical Resonance Imaging test – standard procedure for people with head and neck wounds. What the test does is create a diagnostic image of a person’s magical energy. Quite useful for seeing if any central nervous system damage has impacted their ability to use magic. Your test, Mr. Potter, showed no damage. It did, however show that you had a second locus linked to your own. This secondary *corpus magi* was significantly larger and better defined, but it was slowly being integrated into the primary *corpus* that is linked to you.”

“Weird,” Harry said in a wondering tone. “How rare is that, anyway?”

“You are the first and only case we’ve seen of it since the MaRI was developed.”

“That’s really peculiar,” Harry said carefully. “What does it mean though?” *Is this from the merger?*

“As you get older, you may experience some increases in magical power. Those bursts of accidental magic are probably indicative of that. I wonder what could cause such a thing though... Have you been exposed to any usual magical... energies...”

The healer’s voice trailed off as Harry sighed at him. Finally, he raised his hand and tapped the scar above his right eyebrow.

“Ah, yes, that would definitely constitute exposure to, er, well.” Stanhope looked sheepish. “I must say, Mr. Potter, you shouldn’t be that surprised if I forget. It’s not like you go about beating everyone over the head with your celebrity status.”

Harry just grinned. He wished Snape could hear him say that, the git.

“Anyway, thank you for satisfying my professional curiosity. I believe you have some visitors.” The healer walked over to the door and let himself out.

A moment later, Ron stuck his head in the door. “You awake, Harry?”

“Yeah, I am!” Harry said brightly.

Ron stepped carefully into the room, looking around. He was wearing threadbare but comfortable looking trousers with a Chudley Cannons tee-shirt. To Harry’s surprise, Ginny followed him through the door. Harry thought she was looking very pretty in a flower-print sun dress with her hair streaming down her back.

“Mum’s down getting a cuppa from the lunch counter. The healer saw us in the hall and said we could go on in.”

“I’m glad he did, Ron. It’s getting sort of boring now.” Harry cracked a lop-sided smile. “That’s two I owe you. When are you going to get tired of saving my arse?”

Ron looked down and scuffed his shoe, but his ears had already gone red. “The twins drove the car.”

“Who convinced them to go?”

“Well, I did a little, but it was Ginny that really got to them.” Ron glanced sidelong at his little sister, who’d frozen in place and suddenly gone pink. “She wouldn’t leave them alone once her letters stopped being answered.”

“Right, which reminds me, did one of the twins grab my mail?”

“Fred did. But why didn’t you send any responses back with Errol?”

“Some barmy house elf was nicking the letters before I even saw them. He was trying to talk me out of going back to Hogwarts and thought that if I didn’t get any letters I’d think no one cared.” He glanced at Ginny. “As if that would happen.”

She wrung her hands together, but he thought her down-turned face was smiling a little.

“Anyway,” Harry continued. “I convinced the elf that I was going back no matter what, so he eventually returned my mail. Unfortunately, I had a birthday gift on top of the stack. When I opened it, four doxies flew out and began playing merry-hell with me and Hedwig. We killed all of them, but I had to use my wand to get one off of Hedwig. When the owl from the Ministry came, it disrupted this dinner party my uncle was throwing downstairs and his guests left. When he came upstairs he was blazing angry and had just discovered I couldn’t use magic to stop him.”

“I would have hexed him anyway,” Ron snarled.

“In retrospect, I should have. I just didn’t think it would get as bad as it did.”

“He’s hit you before?” Ginny gasped. She was staring at him now, her embarrassment forgotten in her shock.

“Not like this,” Harry said quickly. “Maybe once or twice, not like he really meant it.”

“That’s rubbish,” Ron spat. Harry couldn’t help but smile at his friend’s sentiments.

“Look, it’s over, and I don’t think I’ll have to deal with them again. You can’t imagine what a relief that is.” Harry couldn’t help but smile thinking about The Burrow. He didn’t think he had a single bad memory that took place in the Weasley’s haven.

Ron grunted. “Who do you think gave you the doxies, Harry?”

“I’m not completely sure, but I have my suspicions. Did the twins grab the box?”



Ron shook his head. "That Auror already asked. Sorry, it was really confusing in there, not to mention dark."

"Whoa, Ron, back it up. You three were brilliant in there. The healer says you were incredibly smart to use a spell to levitate me, by the way. There were some loose bone fragments that could have sliced into things if you'd banged me around too much."

Ron looked a little green, but nodded weakly.

"I wish Mum hadn't caught Fred and George," Ginny hissed. Her eyes had gone a little red to match her face.

"What did she catch them doing?" Harry asked curiously.

"They were trying to send a package to your relatives via Muggle post," Mrs. Weasley said angrily as she walked through the doorway. "One with enough explosives and fireworks in it to get them both sent to Azkaban."

"They deserve worse," Ginny said darkly, ignoring the look her mother gave her.

*Was she always this vicious where I was concerned?* Harry wondered. "Your Mum's right. I don't want anyone getting revenge on my relatives... unless I'm personally involved in the planning and execution."

Mrs. Weasley had been smiling at Harry until that last bit. "Harry!" she remonstrated him, "You really shouldn't worry about such things."

"I know," Harry agreed. "At least until I'm seventeen and I can do it legally."

She shook her head as Ron stifled a bark of laughter. Looking at her children, Mrs. Weasley asked "And why did you not stay out in the hallway like I told you to?"

"Mrs. Weasley, the healer sent them on in when he finished examining me," Harry said quickly, wanting to keep his friends out of trouble.

With that, they all settled into chairs and began talking. Mostly, Harry and Ron told stories from their first year at Hogwarts. Carefully edited stories, that is.

After a couple of hours, Mrs. Weasley looked at the clock on the wall. "Oh dear, I need to head back and fix lunch for Percy and the twins, provided they haven't killed each other." She shook her head. "Ron, Ginny, come on."

"I'm not very hungry Mum, is it okay if I stay?" Ginny asked in a small voice.

Her mother gave her a long look, but finally nodded. Ron got up to follow his mother and his stomach gave an audible growl. Both Harry and Ginny had to suppress a snicker, but he never broke his stride as he walked to the door.

He stopped halfway out the door and dug into his pocket. He pulled out something rolled up and tossed it toward Harry's bed. "You almost forgot this," Ron said as he let the door shut behind him.

Bedridden or not, there wasn't much chance a true Seeker would fail to catch something thrown directly at his face. It was the scarf Ginny had made for him. Harry slowly unrolled it and looked over at the youngest Weasley.

Her eyes had gone wide and but she stood her ground.

"I g-guess you really like the colour," she said.

"Yeah," Harry said. "I do."

He couldn't help but stare at her, even as his sense of caution warned him to change the subject immediately. Lying in that stifling room, he didn't think he'd ever get to see her again, and that's when he truly began to hate his aunt and uncle.

Ginny looked back at him for a moment, and then picked up the Daily Prophet her mother had left in one of the chairs. "It's nearly impossible to read one of these things one-handed, you know. Would you like it if I read to you?"

Harry nodded.

And so she sat in the chair, paper folded in her lap, and began reading the stories to him. At first, Harry could care less about the stories, and just lay there listening to her voice. After a while though, she started to insert her own commentary into the stories. Looking down at the paper, she didn't seem to be quite as nervous, and it was almost like reading one of her letters, only out-loud.

Soon Harry began to add his own comments under his breath. She read an article about "prominent purebloods" opposed to the recent spate of Ministry raids looking for cursed Muggle items. Harry responded by coughing and saying "Malfoy" simultaneously every time the "prominent purebloods" were referenced. By the third time Ginny was snorting. By the fifth time she laughed out loud. By the end of the article she had cracked up and nearly fallen out of the chair.

Harry thought her laughter sounded musical; though he figured he was probably just being sappy. Still, it was good to hear her laugh. He'd heard little of it, probably because of the chamber. *Now if that isn't a downer of a thought, Potter you morbid tosser*, he grimaced. Watching Ginny slowly regain her composure, he smiled even as he made a vow. *Screw the bloody continuity. I'll take that Diary and shove it up Lucius' arse first thing. No. Wait... better hold onto it. It is a Horcrux after all. Still, I'm going to keep that ruddy thing away from her this time.*

By the time Ginny's mother returned, the girl's voice was a little hoarse and Harry's sides hurt from laughing too much. He was fairly certain he saw Mrs. Weasley's shadow under the door several minutes before it opened.

"Ginny, it's time to come home. Dinner will be ready soon and I need you to set the table."

Ginny looked rebellious for a moment, but just sighed in resignation.

"Dear, you've been here all day. Visiting hours are almost over and I'm sure Harry is exhausted."

"I'm fine, Mrs. Weasley, but I think Ginny's probably pretty hungry. She's been chewing on her hair."

Ginny jumped and pulled the stray lock of fire-collared hair out of her mouth. She gave Harry a betrayed glare, but he just tried to look innocent; and failed miserably. She gave up the glare as a bad job and began giggling again.

Mrs. Weasley sighed, but she still had a smile on her face. "Come on dear. There will be visiting hours tomorrow as well." She began to lead her slightly less resistant daughter from the room.

"Don't forget your letters, Ginny," Harry called out when they reached the door.

"I won't Harry, but I don't see why you'd want to read them now," she said, looking downward again.

Harry tried to shrug and winced. "I just like knowing what you were thinking when you wrote it. There's a little piece of you in there, you know."

He hadn't meant it to be embarrassing, but his words made her flush like a tomato all over again. "Bye Harry," she whispered as they left the room.

Harry awoke the next morning when an orderly cast a cleansing charm on him. *At least it's less embarrassing than a sponge bath*, he thought groggily. He smiled at the young woman after yawning widely. He scratched his head for a moment before he realized he was using his left hand with no difficulty. The numbness was gone.

After a moment of groping on the nightstand, Harry found his glasses and put them on. The enchanted windows showed it was daylight outside, at least mid-morning. *I don't think they gave me a dreamless sleep potion last night*, Harry mused. Apparently he still managed to sleep through the night without dreaming.

After downing another round of potions, Harry drained the water glass in one drink. Not only was he thirsty, but the mingled aftertaste from

his medicinal potions was impressively foul. However, when the orderly asked him if he was hungry, Harry found himself nodding.

*Every hospital should have some house elves*, Harry reflected as he chewed on a nicely crisped strip of bacon. He was finishing a surprisingly well-cooked breakfast when the door opened.

Ron and Ginny walked in, carrying handfuls of unopened letters. The twins followed them, with Mrs. Weasley bringing up the rear. Of course, the twins started in on him immediately.

"Ickle Harrikins!"

"Imagine meeting you here!"

"One might think—"

"You were a bit under the weather."

"Fred! George! Mind your manners!" Mrs. Weasley scolded. "You said you'd be on your best behaviour if we let you come this time."

"But this is—"

"our best behaviour!"

Ron spoke up as he peered around. "They have a point, Mum. Nothing's exploded yet."

Ginny looked over at Harry, rolling her eyes. He smiled back at her.

"We were just telling ickle Ronnie—"

"Hey! I'm not any shorter than you lot," Ron objected.

"Ah, but you're shorter in all the ways that matter:"

"Wit, sense, pocket change, and dare I say it—"

"Only if you want both your mouths washed out. And I'll use the lye soap this time." Mrs. Weasley's eyes were narrowed, but Harry didn't think she was completely serious.

“Saved by the mum, Ronnikins!”

“As we were saying—“

“before that rude interruption,”

“That we should have continued—“

“Our classes with that old bat Trelawney.”

“As we seen to have—“

“That inner eye she natters on about.”

“Shocked we were,”

“Very shocked indeed!”

“When Mum and Dad—“

“Called a family meeting last night!”

“And we hadn’t even set anything on fire yet!”

“Quite surprising it was!”

“Could have coshed me with a feather,”

“A small one at that,”

“When we found it was true—“

“-and we actually had found a black-haired Weasley!”

Harry looked at Fred and George for a moment before snorting. “Did you rehearse that?” he finally asked. Ron and Ginny were grinning and stifling laughter.

“No, but we did –“

“Practice this bit—“

“If you will remember,”

“At the Sorting Feast—“

“Last fall!”

With that, the twins linked elbows and began dancing a jig, singing “We got Potter! We got Potter!” Harry was roaring with laughter, even before Ron and Ginny joined in. Mrs. Weasley tried to shush them, glancing at the door. Finally she pulled out her wand and cast silencing charms on her children.

“Honestly, I don’t know what’s got into you! This is a hospital! There are sick people here and healers trying to do their jobs,” Molly said as she frowned at Harry, who was holding his stomach and lying back on the pillows, red-faced. “I’m sorry Harry, I had no idea they had something like this planned.” She seemed actually distressed.

“N-no, it’s okay,” Harry said. “It actually was funny. Muggles have this saying: ‘Laughter is the best medicine.’ So, I think I just got a dose big enough to bring me back from the dead.”

Mrs. Weasley’s face went pale all of the sudden and Harry felt ashamed. He was just trying to let her know that the twins’ little skit actually made him feel better... not remind her of how badly he’d been hurt.

Wiping at her eyes, Mrs. Weasley let out a sigh and raised her wand again and cancelled the charms. “You are far too forgiving, Harry. Now, if the rest of you do not stay quiet I will send you home.”

“Right Mum,” one twin said, rubbing his ear theatrically.

“We get the message,” the other one elaborated.

“We brought your mail, Harry,” Ron announced, stepping forward. “We saw Ginny gathering up some of your letters and figured you’d rather have the whole lot.”

Harry glanced at Ginny, who was beginning to turn pink again. "Thanks," he said, trying to meet Ginny's eyes, but she wouldn't look up.

"We sorted it a bit," Ron said. "I have the letters from Hogwarts and from students. Ginny's still carrying her letters," he added frowning. "And the twins have everything else."

"For a firstie, you sure get a lot of mail. George and I have stuff from half the shops on Diagon Alley, including Gringotts," Fred said coolly.

"Fred, don't pry into Harry's affairs," Mrs. Weasley scolded.

"There's a letter from Gringotts?" Harry asked, sitting up. "Let's see it."

George frowned and began digging through a stack of letters. "Here it is," he said, handing Harry an envelope of creamy white vellum with an elaborate Gringotts seal on the flap.

Harry broke the seal and pulled out a short note.

*Mr. Potter,*

*The diversification we discussed has been completed. Please contact us at your earliest convenience when you wish action taken.*

*-Goldfarb*

Harry looked up with a wicked grin.

Ron was giving him an odd look. "What's that all about?" he asked, nodding at the letter.

"Well, it means my preparations are complete," Harry said with a smirk. He glanced over at Ginny, who was looking interested again. He thought the twins had likely teased her about the letters that morning, so he figured it wouldn't hurt to get her some payback. "You're right, Ginny. Blowing up someone's mailbox is very amateurish." He sighed and clucked his tongue. "Now, getting them sacked is another matter entirely."



Ginny looked up, confused. But after a moment, she caught his intent and gave her brothers a very superior look.

“Harry?” Mrs. Weasley spoke up. “What are you up to?”

“Well, I had the Goblin who manages my parent’s trust buy up some shares in the company where my uncle works,” Harry explained. “I know Mr. Shacklebolt said he’d try to get him prosecuted, but if that doesn’t work, and he tries to do anything at the hearing, he’ll lose his job.”

“I’d rather transfigure him into something nasty,” Ron said darkly.

“Or set him on fire,” Ginny added.

“This will be worse,” Harry replied before Mrs. Weasley could object. “He’s always on about how he hates magic. This,” he held up the letter, “was done with no magic at all. I’m beating him at his own game this time.”

Fred let out a low whistle. “George, I think we’re at risk—“

“Of being supplanted as pranksters supreme!” his twin agreed.

“Should have seen this coming—“

“After him smuggling that dragon—“

“Not to mention trashing—“

“The Divination Tower as a diversion!”

“What are you talking about? Harry would do no such thing! Would you, Harry?” Mrs. Weasley turned an outraged expression toward Harry, who felt a sudden urge to sink into the bed. Mrs. Weasley raised an eyebrow at Harry as the silence wore on. She didn’t even notice Ginny kicking Fred in the shin, making him hop about on one foot.

“Well, it’s a long story, Mrs. Weasley,” Harry said apologetically. “Hagrid had this dragon egg he won in a card game, and when it got

too big for him we helped some friends of Charlie's transport Norbert down to the preserve in Romania."

Mrs. Weasley's eyes had gone wide. "Harry, that's *illegal!* Do you know how much trouble you could have got into?" She rounded on Ron. "I suppose you were helping him, weren't you? Tell me the truth, Ronald Bilius Weasley, or so help me..." She didn't notice Ginny get George, either.

"No, I didn't," Ron said disgustedly. "Stupid thing bit my hand so Neville had to help with the crate." He paled as his mother looked even angrier. "Mum, we had to! Hagrid is Harry's friend. Besides," he added innocently, "didn't Hagrid help when you and dad were almost caught at the Astronomy Tower?"

Molly Weasley stopped dead in her tracks, mouth open in mid-tirade. Her face went from pale with anger to red as a tomato in seconds. "Yes, I see. Well, don't let it happen again. Alright Harry? Ron?" she said tonelessly.

Harry and Ron looked at each other and nodded vigorously.

"Good," Mrs. Weasley said. "Now that's settled, I'll go see the healer about when you can come home, Harry." She smiled faintly and left the room.

"Oi! Ginny—"George said the instant the door shut. He was still rubbing his shin.

"What the bloody hell—"Fred continued, tapping his leg with his fingertips and frowning.

"Was that for?"

Ginny still had her fists planted on her hips. "I would never have expected *you two*, of all people to go all Percy on Harry!" she snapped, still outraged.

"Well, we had to make sure—" Fred began.

"Harry could handle a Weasley chewing out—"

“While he still had the protection of a hospital bed.”

Ginny sniffed. “I think you’re just afraid of the competition, to sink to such a low.”

“Never see little Gin-Gin lose her rag like that, do we, brother of mine?” Fred asked his twin in an arch tone.

“Truly, oh brother of mine. I think someone may not be quite as happy as the rest of us at having Harry as a *brother*.” George replied in a conspiratorial murmur.

Ginny had a stricken look on her face and Harry felt a sudden flash of anger. “That’s enough, you two,” he snapped. Harry had given the twins orders before, when he’d assumed temporary command of the disintegrating Order of the Phoenix. He’d slipped into his ‘voice of command’ without really meaning to. It didn’t work so well with a twelve-year-old’s voice, but it had the desired effect.

“Sorry, Gin,” they muttered in unison.

As Molly Weasley tried to locate Healer Stanhope, she steadily regained her composure. Harry and Ron had never mentioned anything about smuggling a dragon out of Hogwarts! She couldn’t believe they’d even tried to do something so outrageous, let alone get away with it.

She heaved a tired sigh. She’d hoped that once the twins were safely graduated she could stop worrying so much. But it appeared that Ron was just as trouble-prone as his brothers. She’d been horrified when he mentioned the incident at the Astronomy tower. Fortunately, he appeared not to understand exactly what had happened – only that Hagrid had helped her and Arthur out of a jam. Thinking about the start of that night gave her a warm glow. It was the first time Arthur admitted he loved her, and after that they lost all track of time. If Hagrid hadn’t hidden them from Filch... She shook her head and asked the one of the white-robed witches where she could find Healer Stanhope.

As Molly waited outside the ward where she was told the healer was conducting his rounds, she realized something was bothering her.

Ginny was not at all surprised by the twins' revelation. She regretted for a moment her decision not to read any of her daughters' correspondence. On the other hand, she knew Ginny would not take it well if she found out. She knew being the only girl in a house full of boys meant that privacy was at a premium. Her relationship with her daughter was not as close as she'd like it to be... they were too different in some very basic ways. However, she didn't envy Arthur's closeness to 'his little girl'. In some ways, she wondered if her Ginevra was just playing a role with her father as well.

Molly sighed. Perhaps she wasn't as close to her youngest as she wanted to be. That didn't mean she couldn't try to bridge that distance. She had an entire summer before her last baby started at Hogwarts.

"Ah, Mrs. Weasley," Healer Stanhope said as he walked through the doorway.

Molly gathered herself and smiled. "Healer Stanhope, I have to say you do incredible work. Harry looks like a different person."

The grey-haired man waved his hands dismissively. "Yes, well, when you work with a healthy young man with magic that strong... well, any old duffer can look like a champion."

"Does that mean he can be released soon?"

"Like to take him home, would you?" the healer asked, but his eyes were kindly.

"Well, I'm sure he might rest better there. I'd like him to be able to forget... everything," Molly said quietly.

Stanhope looked her in the eye and for a moment his genial affability fell away like an old cloak. "I think we need to talk about that," he said firmly. His hand on her elbow was light as he guided her to a small meeting room. As she took the offered seat, she felt a quiver of dread. *Was Harry not going to be all right?* She wondered. *He'd said the poor boy was healthy...* She hadn't got to see that much of Harry Potter, but what she did know wrung her heart. She didn't want to see him go through anything else.

“Normally, this is something I would discuss only with an immediate family member. However, I understand you and your husband are to become Harry’s guardians?” Stanhope said as he sat down.

“Yes, we talked to Harry and my husband has already filed the paperwork.”

“I understand you were there when the Auror took his deposition.” It was not a question.

Molly nodded. Thinking about what she heard still made her feel sick.

“Despite what Harry may have said, I don’t believe this is the first time something like this has happened to him,” Stanhope said in a steely voice.

“I don’t think Harry would lie to us and his friends,” Molly replied.

“I’m not sure it’s as simple as a matter of truthfulness,” Stanhope said with a sigh. “The boy shows signs of a severe mental disturbance. Last night was the first night since he was admitted that he didn’t have to have a dreamless sleep potion. We don’t like to administer them if we can help it, but he would have such violent nightmares each night that we had little choice.”

“Couldn’t they have been caused by what happened on his birthday?”

Stanhope leaned back in his chair. “When a boy suffering from broken bones tries to sit up in bed, that’s not a normal dream. Do you know if he’s suffered from nightmares before this?”

Molly sat thinking for a few minutes. “I believe my son mentioned that he didn’t sleep well when he was at Hogwarts.”

The healer nodded slowly. “I think he’s been through a lot more than he lets on... and it’s left its mark on the boy. He acts in some ways like the older Aurors, the ones that were hurt badly in the last war. A lot of them saw things, or had things done to them, that they never recovered from. Do you remember the Longbottoms?” he asked.

Molly nodded. “Their son is classmates with Harry and Ron.”

“Not all of the old veterans are as bad off as Frank and Alice, but many have problems like Harry. Some are just a bit jumpy, others will go weeks before they get an uninterrupted night’s sleep. A lot of them never fully recover,” The healer said as he looked Molly square in the eyes. “I think you should probably discuss this with your husband as well.”

Molly inhaled sharply, but her voice came out in a whisper. “We are not going to abandon that boy now,” she practically hissed.

“Good. But you both need to make an informed decision. It’s entirely possible that Harry has gone through things so horrible that he’s repressed the memories. Him getting better may or may not require that he remember. If he does, you will have a very powerful young wizard going through an intense emotional trauma. Are you ready to deal with that as well?”

“We will do whatever needs to be done,” Molly said earnestly. “That poor boy has gone through so much, only to be left with people who treated him worse than dirt. It is high time he got to live with people that care about him. Otherwise I’m afraid of what will become of him.”

Stanhope nodded slowly. “I hope you and your family are in this for the long haul. I’m not a specialist in mental injuries, but I don’t care to think about what another disappointment could do to him.”

“If by some freak occurrence my husband and I were both to falter, I doubt our children would ever let us get away with it. My youngest four are very close to Harry.”

“Good,” Stanhope said, smiling slightly. It was his first change of expression since they’d sat down. “I think he needs as many friends as he can get.”

A/N

A bit of fluff, a stirring of plot, and a pinch of character development. sniff Smells like another update brewing.

Before you ask, no Harry is not even close to done with the Dursleys. Revenge is a dish best served cold, not microwaved like fast food.

If you're curious, Stanhope is actually describing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

I don't want the admins to yank this story for having too long an author's notes – so if you have specific questions I have not answered, you can use the yahoo group I started, viridiandreams. The URL is in my author profile, since the posting process will remove it from this file.

There is also a poll on the yahoo group – since the response within the reviews looks about fifty-fifty to me.

Other issues:

Thanks for the people that pointed out the glitch about Ron's spell-casting being charged to Harry. I altered Molly's line to reflect that. Everyone else's lines can stand, I think. The twins wouldn't want Harry getting busted either.

On the subject of martial arts – Harry is nowhere near a true black belt, not with nine months of self-study. Even his older self had limited 'formal' training, and none of that muscle memory or conditioning carried over. My college roommate got a black-belt in shotokan in two years from a traditional dojo. He trained maniacally (5-9 times a week) and had *excellent* instructors. (Sensei's Sill and Mikami even got a no-talent lump like me to some basic proficiency.)

And I stand by my statements regarding twelve year old martial artists after a couple of good hits. I've worked with some talented kids before, but this story is not a Matrix sequel.

Yeah, I got a Masters in Developmental Psychology, and it definitely colors my world-view.

Nice catch on the typo, ctsuda.

Again, thank you all for the kind words... they only motivate me to type faster!

-Matthew

## Chapter 13

Hermione Granger was a clever girl.

She actually preferred to think of herself as a young woman, or more properly now, a young witch. Her parents, however, were a little less enthused at such a change in nomenclature. She knew they were less than comfortable with some of the -- changes -- their little girl had gone through over the last couple of years, so she decided not to push the issue for now.

She knew she made people uncomfortable at times. Before starting at Hogwarts, many of her teachers seemed to become worn down by her enthusiasm for her studies. She found this all a bit odd. Weren't they supposed to be interested in what they taught? Her classmates had made no secret that they preferred to avoid her company. "Bookworm" was the nicest thing they'd called her. If they felt threatened by her intelligence, then she'd rub their noses in it ever chance she got.

It made very little sense to her, this obsession other girls seemed to have with things that really didn't matter. Who cared about looking *pretty* if you got awful marks? Pretty wouldn't get you into university. Not a good one, anyway. Pretty wouldn't get you a career, not one worth having anyway. She was appalled when she realized how much time each day some of her classmates spent on 'getting ready' to go to school. Hygiene, of course was important. But a shower, brushing her hair, and getting dressed was the limit. She sat down with a pencil and paper one morning and calculated that over a year Frieda Hopkins (by her own admission) wasted enough time to have read War and Peace. The original translation.

Hermione knew she was no prize in the looks department. She'd inherited her father's incredibly bushy hair, but her mother would not dream of letting her keep it as short as he did. She'd also inherited a considerable overbite from her mother's side of the family. "Beaver-Face" was one of the less polite names she'd heard. She was due to start orthodontic treatments, but her acceptance at Hogwarts put a crimp in that plan. She couldn't return for re-fittings and adjustments while she was away at school. All this meant that she was going to



have to get by on her brain, and not by playing dress-up, which was fine by her.

It also meant that it was extremely distressing when she realized she'd been rather stupid about something. The letter in her hand was proof of that.

Her first year at Hogwarts had been like a dream, in good and bad ways. Discovering that she was special, magical even was enough to go to her head if she wasn't careful. Discovering that Muggle-born witches and wizards were looked down upon by magical society helped prevent her head from getting too big. She still remembered the first time she heard "Mudblood" and knew it applied to her. The flash of shame and anger almost made her ill as Draco took to the air, with Harry a second behind him. Gregory Goyle was snickering about the remark when Ron pulled his wand out and asked him which armpit he wanted his nose moved to. It was an utterly crude remark, and he really shouldn't have been threatening a student, but she was glad it shut the Slytherin up.

She'd never had anyone defend her before, not like that. It was a rather odd feeling. It was sort of embarrassing. After all, she should be able to stand up for herself. At the same time, it was nice not to have to. It was a little disconcerting to find out she had a friend and hadn't even realized it immediately. She'd had that driven home when her dream turned into a nightmare. The horrid things those Slytherins said about her were bad enough, but they were nothing compared to the terror she experienced when that enormous troll smashed his way into the girl's lavatory. What followed was a hazy kaleidoscope in her memory: getting dragged out by a hand as large as her torso, being hurled through the air, the gentle sway as Ron's spell caught her. She was still helpless in midair when Harry was swatted aside like a bug. The look on his face was almost frightening as he climbed back to his feet, picked up his wand in the other hand, and used Neville's distraction to kill a fully-grown troll.

Harry was fascinating to her, but in an unsettling way... like a half-completed puzzle. He seemed unusually mature, except when he was consciously trying to have fun with them. Then it was almost like he was playing a role... it would have made her wonder if he was just

manipulating them, except for the real joy that crept into his voice. None of it really made any sense to her. He was unusually skilled in magic, but she was better at working things out. It was like he'd always been reading ahead, but she noticed that when they studied together he actually read slower than she did.

And then there were his moods. He often came to breakfast acting like he'd just left a funeral. It took half the meal before Harry seemed to really come back to himself. Ron was best at dealing with Harry when he was like this, and she couldn't help but admire the way the gangly red-head looked out for their friend. Once in a rare while, she'd catch Harry's eyes in an unguarded moment. She remembered their last dinner in the Great Hall. His eyes... for a moment they seemed so old.

She knew Harry was hiding something, and that it was probably fairly awful. When she asked him about it, he always re-directed the conversation or avoided the issue altogether. It was frustrating, but it wasn't until she made the connection between Harry's headaches and Professor Snape that it began to come together. While she had worked it out for herself, she still had a suspicion that Harry already knew about it, but couldn't tell her. It was all so convoluted that she got headaches thinking about it. She would have been quite angry with Harry if he hadn't hinted he was as constrained as the rest of them.

Fortunately, her other friends were not as complicated. Neville was a quiet, shy boy, but he was starting to grow out of it. He always seemed a little sad about something. She had an idea she knew what it was, but she couldn't bring herself to pry. It was only when they studied for Herbology that he really opened up. His enthusiasm for his favourite subject was inspiring, and he always led them through revisions for that class.

Ronald was even easier to deal with. His face was always an open book, at least to her. It was comforting, in a way, to have a friend that didn't really have any secrets. No shadows lurked behind those startlingly blue eyes. But that wasn't to say he was simple. He was, she admitted, a bit thick on certain subjects. But at other times he'd display an amazing perceptiveness. He'd always encouraged her to

stand up for herself, even after that horrible confrontation with Professor Snape when he threatened to snap her wand. She'd never been the object of such hatred before, and for nothing more than the circumstances of her birth. She realized that day that being a 'Mudblood' was something she was going to have to deal with for the rest of her life. Even if she had friends who would stand by her, other people would hate her for it. The look on Harry's face when the jars started exploding was almost frightening, but she knew that would never change the opinions of the Snapes and Malfoys of the Wizarding world. After Harry went to sleep, she sat in the common room and gave serious thought to owling her parents to withdraw her from the school.

She was on the couch, staring into the fireplace, when Ron sat down beside her.

"He's still asleep," he said quietly.

"He seemed exhausted when we left the dungeons," she fretted.

Ron nodded, the firelight striking golden highlights off his hair. "It took a lot for him to not let Snape have it, after what he said."

"I don't want him getting in trouble for me," she said in an aggrieved tone.

"He didn't just do it for you, Hermione," Ron sighed. "My parents fought a war to stop that kind of thinking. His died for it," he said in a serious tone, looking in the fire all the while. "That's why You-Know-Who got so many people to follow him. It gave them an excuse to feel superior and lord it over the Muggles and the Muggle-born. Someone like Draco knows that you are smarter than he is, and will make a far better witch than he will a wizard. It's got to be killing him inside, so he attacks you on things that don't even matter, like who your parents are. It's how he distracts himself from the fact that he's just a spoiled, smarmy little git."

It was one of the most mature and comforting things he'd ever said. She turned to stare at him, blinking rapidly. "T-thank you, Ronald," she whispered.

He ducked his head, blushed and looked away from her. "Gryffindors got to take care of their own, yeah?"

Thinking about his words, she'd had an epiphany. Ron was straightforward and didn't hide things... but he had a lot more depth to him than a first glance revealed. Somewhere along the line he'd picked up a strong protective instinct. It might have come from having a little sister. Almost every time he'd got upset or cross with his friends, she could in some way trace it back to his desire to watch out for them. He was as frustrated as she was with Harry, but for different reasons. While she couldn't stand unfinished puzzles and unanswered questions, her friend got annoyed when Harry wouldn't tell him what was hurting him. It made Ron feel helpless and frustrated, and she often found herself acting as his sounding board as he vented about it.

Harry gave a plausible explanation regarding how he came to be confronting Quirrell alone, but she had her suspicions... just like she did about Halloween. Ron told her that the letters Harry spent hours writing were going to his little sister, who Harry had only met once on the train platform. She thought it was a sweet that he didn't want her to feel left out, and her information about magical housekeeping was fascinating. But at the same time, Hermione knew he was also doing more with those letters. Harry never spoke of what he wrote to Ginny about, except in the most general terms, but she had a feeling that he was compartmentalizing his relationships. Was this an aspect of his secretive nature or something else?

Hermione Granger looked down at the letter in her hand. Here was a good reason for him to be secretive.

She, Ron, and Neville had stayed in contact by owl post once the summer started. Harry, however, neither sent, nor replied to any messages. Immediately, Ron blamed 'those awful Muggles' Harry lived with. Hermione wondered privately if Ron would have been so quick to blame if Harry had been sent to live with a Wizarding family. There were other reasons, she wrote to Ron, why Harry might not be answering. They could all be gone on holiday. His post might be diverted for security reasons. Or he might be immersed in a research

project similar to the one he'd given her in the Gryffindor common room.

This last letter disabused her of those notions. When she read the condition Harry was in when Ron and the twins found him, she began crying. The thought of Harry being beaten by his relatives made her physically ill. Errol blinked at her sleepily as she dashed off a reply, asking a dozen questions in the first paragraph. She was about to seal the letter when she read over it and reconsidered.

Hermione Granger was a very clever girl. That's what made it even harder to admit it when she was wrong. If she wasn't a Gryffindor, she wasn't sure she could have added what she wrote next.

PS – Ronald, I also want to add that I was wrong. I dismissed your concerns because I thought you didn't trust Muggles to take care of our friend. Well, I mean I thought you didn't trust them because they were Muggles. I was wrong and you were right... and it haunts me that my words might have delayed you going after Harry and prolonging his suffering. You were a better friend than I, and you didn't forget that 'Gryffindors take care of their own.' I have a little project that Harry asked me to take care of over the summer, but if you or he need anything, please do not hesitate to contact me. I will write Harry when you say he can get post again, but please let him know how sorry I am.

She looked down at the parchment and let out a sigh. She felt better getting that out, but she was a little worried at Ron's reaction. She might not have any friends left by the time they returned to Hogwarts.

It was with some trepidation that she unfolded Ron's reply a couple of days later. Her mother had asked her why she'd been eating so poorly, but she just blamed it on an upset stomach. At least the letter wasn't a Howler. She remembered Harry sharing Ginny's explanation of the glowing red envelopes Mrs. Weasley had owled to the twins on a couple of occasions.

As she read the letter, Hermione felt a warm sense of relief. Ron didn't blame her. In fact, he said it was Ginny who'd really forced the issue – which was a bit odd. Ron insisted that if anyone was at fault it

was him. He and Harry had talked about the Dursleys over Christmas, but he and the twins waited too long to check on Harry.

Hermione blew out her breath in an exasperated sigh. The boy was very noble, but it was silly for him to blame himself for something Harry's horrid relatives had done. She barely finished the thought before she caught herself and began blushing. The same could probably be said of herself.

The news that Ron's parents were applying to become Harry's legal guardians brought a genuine smile to her face. Harry needed a home with people who actually cared about him. From Ron's descriptions, The Burrow would be an ideal environment for Harry.

The next day was a Saturday, and her father agreed to take her to the library. Such trips were a frequent occurrence in the Granger household, but this time Hermione headed for the Periodicals sections, rather than New Acquisitions. The librarian on duty showed her where to find the Surrey periodicals, and it didn't take her long to find the article in the Surrey Advertiser: "Local Community rallies Around Accused Couple".

She copied down the pertinent details before she became too upset. The Dursley's had been charged by the Surrey Area Child Protection Committee, but they'd hired a very sharp solicitor. Their neighbours were all giving deposition in support of "such a fine upstanding family" and going on about that "no good delinquent they'd been saddled with". The story stated that the victim, whose name was withheld, was being treated in a private facility.

When she got home, Hermione wrote a scathing letter to the editors of the Surrey Advertiser, suggesting that Little Whinging should have the tap water checked for lead, as the town was obviously full of imbeciles. After that was done, she felt a little better. She spent considerably longer on her second letter.

Dear Harry,

Ron tells me you are feeling much better now, which I am glad to hear. I went to the library and found an article about your aunt and uncle in the Surrey Advertiser. I've included a summary on another

page, so you can read it when you feel up to it. I know the article is probably upsetting, but I know you hate having things kept from you.

On that subject, I think my research has borne fruit. I found a reference in a history on the war against Grindelwald. I had no idea that there was magical involvement in World War Two! Anyway, it was a list of training given to spies attempting to infiltrate the dark lord's forces. The infiltration was for the most part a failure, and a lot of brave men died in very messy ways, but I digress.

The curriculum for the training mentioned something called Occlumency. Most of the other items made sense, but none of them mentioned protection from mental examinations so I did some more digging. I am now a proud owner of Occlumency: the Hidden Arte. I've read it already, of course, and it was quite fascinating. I think it is just what we need to stop a certain person from abusing his abilities. I've taken the liberty of having the other copy Flourish and Blotts could locate sent to you at The Burrow.

I'm going to practice this very hard while I'm on holiday with my parents. (They want to leave next week, so owl traffic may take a bit longer after that.) From what that book implies about Legilimency, you are right to be cautious. Of course, the fact that you know to be cautious is probably part of what you are hiding. Don't worry about answering my questions until I can make sure I will be able to keep your confidences.

Speaking of confidences, you may wish to speak with Ron, and possibly his sister and brothers. I think they still feel bad about not coming to get you sooner. I myself didn't have a clue, and well, urged them to be careful so they didn't get you in trouble. I suppose that is sort of ironic, but not in a funny way. In his last letter he sounded dreadfully guilty.

If you need anything, anything at all, please let me know. If this Occlumency is not going to do what you need it to do, please let me know as soon as possible. I might be able to talk my parents into another trip to Diagon Alley before we go to Heathrow. Hopefully, when we get back we can all get together to see Neville's new greenhouse.

Your friend,

Hermione

Harry was very relieved to be leaving Saint Mungo's. Healer Stanhope finally cleared him to be discharged after his foot stopped tingling. However, that did not dissuade Mrs. Weasley from holding his elbow as they made their way to the Floo. Deep down, Harry didn't really mind how she tended to hover. As much as it drove her children spare, a small corner of his soul relished the attention. She was the closest thing to a mother he'd ever really known, and it was hard to keep his emotions in check at times.

Ginny was the only person in the kitchen when they arrived, and she immediately dropped the potato she was peeling into the sink.

"Don't waste food," he said, stepping past her with a grin and rescuing the spud. He smiled as her face slowly reddened.

"Harry, you're here!" Ron called from the doorway. In less than a minute he'd dragged Harry all the way up the zigzagging stairs to his room, where a second bed had been set up. It was hard to tell, since he had to squint to block out the orange glare, but it appeared that his school trunk sat at the foot of the bed.

"I see you decided to decorate with Chudley Cannon colours," Harry observed, wincing and rubbing theatrically at his eyes.

"Yeah, brilliant, isn't it?" Ron's grin was infectious.

"It's very bright, I'll give you that." Harry smirked. "Thanks for getting my stuff out of there."

Ron looked a little uncomfortable. "The twins did most of that."

Harry stared at him for a moment. "Hermione's worried about you, you know."

Ron twitched and gave Harry a strange look. "We've got all summer to do those ruddy essays."



“For some odd reason, she seems to think you’re blaming yourself for what my uncle did.”

Ron started to look a little annoyed.

Harry held up the palm of his hand. “She didn’t tell me anything directly, but you know she’s almost as bad at the touchy-feely business as I am. I made a guess and your face just confirmed it, mate.” Harry sighed. “Look, I tend to get into a lot of rubbish I didn’t ask for. Sometimes I can see it coming, other times I can’t. If I didn’t anticipate them going completely off their nut, how could you expect to?”

“Blimey, Harry, how can you talk about something like that like it’s no big deal? You could have died!”

“I’m not trying to be blasé about this Ron... But... I haven’t been normal since that mad bastard threw the killing curse at me when I was a baby.” Harry made a face. “You get used to something if that’s all you experience, yeah? Maybe your family can show me what normal is like.”

“Dunno if we qualify as normal, Harry. I think Mum’s out to fatten you up like a Christmas goose though.”

Harry rubbed at his ribs. “That actually doesn’t sound too bad.” He gave Ron an even look. “So are you all right now?”

Ron nodded.

“Am I going to have to have this talk with the twins as well?”

His friend shook his head. “Maybe Ginny though,” he said in a small voice, “she seems a bit down about something.”

“I’ll do that,” Harry agreed. “You’ve always looked out for her, haven’t you?”

Ron looked very uncomfortable and wouldn’t meet his eyes. “Well, she’s my sister,” was all he said.

Harry made an exasperated sound. "You say that like it's something to be embarrassed about. What's wrong with Gryffindors looking out for their own?"

Ron frowned at him. "We don't know if she'll be in our house, Harry."

"Ron, she's a Weasley. Don't be daft."

"She's also the first girl Weasley in several generations," Ron snapped.

Harry gave his friend an appraising look. "You're actually worried about this, aren't you? Have you ever known her to back down from anything or anyone?"

Ron looked thoughtful. "That doesn't necessarily mean she'll get sorted that way."

"Tell you what. I'll bet you half the galleons in my vault she ends up with us." Harry braced himself for the inevitable reaction.

Ron's eyes narrowed. "I don't have that kind of money," he snapped.

Harry rubbed his chin to hide a small grin. "No, your stakes are not trying to boss her around for the school year if I'm right. Besides, if I'm right, she'd just hex you for trying anyway," Harry concluded airily. The old Ron would have stomped off or acted uncomfortable the rest of the day. Harry was inordinately pleased when his best friend just rolled his eyes and made a rude noise.

Soon the boys were racing down the stairs to the kitchen. Mrs. Weasley was cutting up some chicken and Ginny was still working on the potatoes with an aggrieved look on her face. Harry walked up beside Ginny, grabbed a small knife, and started peeling as well. Ron, who was heading for the door, gave Harry an odd look.

"Ron, go tell the twins to make sure the yard is picked up, then come back in here and set the table." Mrs. Weasley said, giving Harry an approving look.

Ginny froze when Harry walked up beside her. After a moment she shook her head and began peeling again. However, her cuts were a lot messier, and her peelings were rather thick. Harry also noticed her hands were shaking a little. "If you cut your thumb, Ronnikins will never let you hear the end of it," he muttered.

She cocked her head and looked up at him. Harry smiled and she smiled back. She whistled a little tune as she began peeling again.

Harry knew something was wrong the minute Mr. Weasley Flooded home. When he stepped out of the green flames, his normally genial face was creased with worry lines. When he whispered to his wife, she too began frowning.

The table was set and dinner was almost ready, but Mrs. Weasley immediately shooed everyone but Harry out of the kitchen. She left a large spoon stirring the mashed potatoes on it's own as she motioned for him to sit.

"Something must have gone wrong," Harry said without preamble.

"Yes, I'm afraid so," Mr. Weasley agreed. "Auror Shacklebolt was keeping me updated on how his case was progressing. It seems The Dursleys have retained a very top-drawer Muggle solicitor to represent them... one who apparently has some expertise in dealing with the Ministry. The representative from our legal office that met with them did not handle things well at all."

Harry felt his stomach fill with ice. "How bad is 'not well'?"

Arthur swallowed before continuing. "The Dursleys have given signed and witnessed depositions regarding their versions of what occurred. Copies of these documents are being held by a number of other parties, with instructions to mail them to various Muggle publications the day the trial starts. In exchange for their silence and giving up guardianship, the ministry liaison agreed to stop the prosecution."

Harry felt like a statue carved from ice. His uncle was going to walk away from this unscathed. Hell, from that article Hermione read, he was probably going to be lionized as a victim of unjust persecution. For a moment, Harry toyed with the idea of finding a way to leak their

address to Voldemort and letting history repeat itself. Looking back, Harry would wonder always wonder about what changed his mind. Was it a desire to not sink to that level, or the fact that he wanted to destroy them personally?

“Harry?” Mrs. Weasley’s voice distracted him, even as he made his decision. Her hand was warm on his forearm, covering the doxy scar.

“I need to go to Gringotts,” he said quietly, then shook his head. “Actually, I need to schedule an appointment - that would be better. If you’ll excuse me for a moment?” His voice echoed hollowly in his ears as he fumbled for quill and parchment in drawer under the clock.

Master Goldfarb,

A situation has arisen where I would appreciate your expert advice. I was hoping I could impose upon your schedule for a few minutes at any time that would be convenient for you.

May your Gold always flow,

Harry James Potter

Harry gave Hedwig a few strokes as he tied the letter to her leg. After he sent her on her way, he sat back down again. He made a conscious effort not to clench his fists.

“Harry,” Mrs. Weasley said in a kindly voice. “I don’t think the Goblins usually make customers schedule appointments.”

He nodded. “I know, but I’m asking him to help me with something that is just barely legal with my inheritance. I think I should probably be as polite as possible, don’t you?”

Mr. Weasley nodded and his wife looked thoughtful. “I need to go to Diagon Alley tomorrow to run some errands, so I can take you to Gringotts, unless he won’t see you tomorrow.”

“I think he will. But asking first is a gesture of respect. I suppose I’m buttering him up a bit.”

“That can’t hurt, Harry. But I’m afraid this may not be the end of it,” Mr. Weasley said quietly. “When I read the report on the meeting, I discovered something troubling. Right at the end, the Dursley’s solicitor made a remark about how his clients had supported you long enough, and that they would look forward to you starving in some orphanage. Young Derments, who was quite annoyed at how neatly he’d been handled, made some remarks about you being the heir to a massive fortune from your parents.”

Harry smiled grimly. “The Dursleys still have to give me up though, right? Finding that out will just grind salt in the wound.”

Mr. Weasley blinked in surprise. “I suppose it would, Harry. But I’m more concerned about him spreading that information. We’ve been keeping your guardianship hearing as quiet as possible, but this may complicate things.”

“Wouldn’t that be privileged information... oh wait, who am I kidding. The Dursleys would want him to tell anyone willing to use that to make my life miserable. Has the hearing been scheduled yet?”

“It’s set for next Wednesday at the Ministry.”

“Please don’t take this the wrong way, Mr. Weasley, but is anyone at the ministry besides you both competent and honest?”

Mr. Weasley gave a lop-sided smile. “I suppose it doesn’t always seem like it, but yes, there are some.”

Harry nodded. “Is there any good news?”

“Dinner is ready,” Mrs. Weasley said brightly.

Harry chuckled, “That’s good enough for me.”

“I hope so. You really need to eat better, Harry,” Mrs. Weasley chided as she opened the door. She glared at the sight of her four youngest children clustered around the keyhole.

“I told them not to eavesdrop,” Percy said pompously from the stairs.

“It’s all right,” Harry said quickly. “I don’t care if they know – it just saves me having to tell them.”

“We were just staying handy for when dinner was ready,” Ron said cheekily as they filed in and took their seats.

Harry had eaten more than a few meals at The Burrow, but it felt like he could recall each one distinctly. Being surrounded by Weasleys: eating, talking, laughing, and obviously caring about each other – it was so different that it made Harry feel like a different person as well. It was more than just the fact that they accepted him. They wanted him there. And this time around, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were basically adopting him.

True to Ron’s predictions, his mother urged Harry to take a fourth helping of the roasted chicken. As it was, he was nearly in physical pain when he got up from the table. He hadn’t really been able to enjoy the pudding either. Ginny looked at him a little oddly when he started helping with the dishes, and he remembered that clearing the table had always been one of her chores. He shrugged. If he was going to make a place for himself here, they needed to stop treating him so much as a guest.

To be honest, it was also a chance to be around Ginny, as well. After nine months of nothing but letters, it was something else to actually see her again. Of course, she was much shyer in person than she was on parchment, but he hoped that would wear off. It was also interesting to get to know her before her ordeal in the Chamber of Secrets, and he could see hints of the drive and fire that had finally made him aware of her in his sixth year.

Harry shook his head as he put the last of the plates in the sink. He needed to keep his focus. Being adopted by the Weasleys was a massive change from the old timeline. He needed to remember the pledge he made to himself in St. Mungos. He wasn’t going to sit back and rely on his foreknowledge anymore. He still retained some of his abilities and knowledge, and moreover he knew how bad things were going to get when Voldemort returned. There were changes to be made, and anyone that got in his way was going to think they’d been run over by a Hungarian Horntail.

A/N

Hello again. This took about a day longer than I really wanted it to. Haven't been sleeping well and had some social obligations.

The slight majority – in reviews and according to the poll on my Yahoo Group – indicated that I should update as frequently as possible. So, when I hit a good stopping point, up it goes. (If you want to participate in the poll, my yahoo group is viridiandreams and the link is in my author profile.)

Not nearly as many reviews to read through this time, but here are my responses:

Harry doesn't know what form Fate really is taking. Does it exist? Is it a presence, or more of an impersonal force? Of course, that just means Harry is asking the same questions that started with the ancient Greek dudes.

Harry hasn't forgotten the doxies. He's just prioritizing his concerns right now.

When I worked at Burger King, they used microwaves to re-heat up the meat after it had already been grilled.

Yes, Harry is using the first defeat of Voldemort as an excuse to hide the aftereffects of the spirit merger. He's really getting in touch with his inner Slytherin these days.

Regarding PTSD: Harry isn't turning mental – he already is. Nobody can go through what he did in the future and not have major consequences. Healer Stanhope is taking the facts he has available and drawing the wrong conclusion – that Harry has been abused a lot worse than he admits, and is just repressing the memories. Was it fairly clear that was the thrust of his chat with Molly?

Ginny sobbing in chapter 9 was from her being left behind and missing everyone. She was trying to draw some comfort from Harry's compliment.

The scarf – silver and black don't look much alike. She picked the colors to match Harry's eyes and hair – two of his most distinctive features.

One of Ginny's more interesting traits is that temper of hers, especially where Harry is concerned. (The first words Harry ever heard her say in canon were her jumping all over Malfoy. She also turned on Hermione in HBP after he got detention for slicing up the ferret who tried to crucio him.)

I tend to grind my teeth reading fics with stupid and/or easily manipulated Weasley parents. Sorry, they survived fighting a war that killed a lot of great wizards. Darwin says they can't be too useless or they wouldn't have survived to pass on their genes (which they did in spades).

Note: My reference to the Butterfly effect is only with regards to how changes Harry makes will alter subsequent events and diverge them away from his foreknowledge. It should be apparent by now that Harry's alterations are not affecting his own memories of 'the first time around'.

Whatever Snape may or may not have done for Dumbledore, he still treated Harry like crap. If nothing else, his epiphany that Snape had been reading his mind from day one, and still did the things he did, moves Harry past caring. However Dumbledore used Snape for the cause was obviously not effective enough; otherwise Harry wouldn't have needed to travel back in the first place.

The Power that Voldemort knows not of was used in the prologue.

Regarding Harry's magical reserves: There is a hint in chapter seven.

Out of curiosity – which yahoo groups were discussing this story?

While the prophecy regarding Pettigrew has not been made yet in this timeline, Harry is being a little wary of it. In canon, Trelawny didn't make her prediction until the day he was exposed. As someone whose entire existence has been defined by prophecy, Harry has a healthy respect for their significance.



Reading over Harry's remarks to Quirrell, you will see a fair bit of disinformation spread in there. It's intentional.

I'm not always a huge fan of "Hollywood Endings" – which is one reason I like anime. On the other hand I'm not an angst-junkie either. Which means I've pretty much told you nothing about how all this will end...

Fangalla Marie and Eppy the House Elf – A visit from Eppy is truly a memorable occasion. Glad I was able to provoke a tear (but don't tell her that). For the rest of you, Harry Potter and the Azkaban parody is one of the funniest things I have read on this site. It made me snort fish out my nose. Seriously.

I hope some of the character development here will ease the minds roused by 'shipper politics. (I know, 'Hope springs eternal'). Stay tuned for adventures in banking and a moment at the ministry!

For faster response to questions – feel free to join the yahoo group and post there. I check it daily now.

-Matthew

## Chapter 14

Hedwig returned before they retired for the night. Goldfarb was noncommittal in his reply, but said that Harry could meet with him any time tomorrow. Ron was in the process of obliterating Harry at wizarding chess when the snowy owl landed on the board, scattering the pieces.

“Oy! Harry!” Ron objected. He was no more than three moves from checkmate.

“Good girl!” Harry cooed to his owl, stroking the ridges above her eyes.

“Ruddy owl did that on purpose,” Ron said darkly.

“Oh, stop whinging. We both know you were slaughtering me. Too bad you can’t play chess for a living like some Muggles do,” Harry grouched. He’d said it in an offhand way, but his friend’s ears still pinked at the backhanded compliment.

Mrs. Weasley announced it was time they went to sleep, especially since Harry needed to be up early to accompany her to Diagon Alley. As he and Ron went up the stairs, Harry thought about asking Mrs. Weasley to put a silencing charm around his bed. He didn’t really want to talk to her about his nightmares though. She was likely to refuse anyway, now that he thought about it.

He’d stayed at The Burrow a few times during the second war... often to attend a funeral, starting with Ginny’s. The nightmares, either his own or from Tom, would often wake half the house, but Mrs. Weasley insisted on being there to wake him once he started screaming. She’d even gone so far as waiting until he was asleep to dispel the silencing charms he’d placed. By that time Ron was staying in a separate room with Hermione, and it fell to Mrs. Weasley to wake him with a hand on his shoulder and soft words.

As Harry put on his pajamas and curled up in the surprisingly comfortable bed, he noticed Ron watching him. He counted silently to himself. Before he reached twenty, his friend spoke up.

“You still having rough dreams, mate?”

As much as he wanted to snap, Harry stopped himself. It was a reasonable question, and Ron had a right to know what to expect. “Not at St. Mungo’s, but I was also on a lot of potions.”

“S’not a big deal here, mate. The ghoul in the attic wakes me at least once a night, banging on the pipes. I’ll just give you a nudge if I wake up. All right there?”

Harry sighed. “Fine.”

Ron looked like he wanted to say something else, but he just snuffed the candle.

Harry stared into the darkness for a couple of minutes before he spoke again. “Hey Ron?”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks, mate.”

After the battle in the Department of Mysteries, Voldemort had grown very cautious with experiencing strong emotions. By doing so, he could exploit the link between himself and his enemy symbolized by the curse scar. Even if he voluntarily lowered his occlumency shields, Harry seldom got warning visions in time to do anything. Voldemort would suppress his glee while planning his atrocities, and then revel in them once they were committed. Only then would Harry double over in pain, clutching his forehead. Only then would he see what Voldemort was up to. And by that time his victims were usually little more than mutilated bodies.

And so it was when Harry, Ron and Hermione were exploring an abandoned house in Lancashire. There were rumors that Voldemort had rented it long ago when he was still Tom Riddle. Even if they had the correct address, he’d probably only stayed there a fortnight before traveling to the continent. Their search found nothing. As they were leaving, Harry fell to his knees, splitting pain and a savage joy radiating from his scar.

Desperately he focused his mind, hoping against hope he could see something in time to save some of the victims. When he saw an image of The Burrow, walls engulfed in flame as the wards collapsed, he surged to his feet screaming. Ron and Hermione had seized his arms trying to stop him from falling down the steps, so he clasped their shoulders and pulled them with him as he apparated to Ottery St. Catchpole.

The thunderous crack of a triple Apparation drew the attention of a half-dozen Death Eaters still on the property. They charged the trio, curses flying. Harry shrugged free of his friends and brought his wand up. The first *reducto* was screamed at the top of his lungs and the hapless Death Eater wasn't so much killed as *splashed* across the hedgerow behind him. Ron's cutting curse punched a hole completely through another one's chest while Hermione conjured a jet of acid that left another blinded and screaming on the ground.

Harry's next curse missed his target, but sheared through the tree behind the Death Eater. The toppling trunk crushed the surprised wizard to the ground. He was peripherally aware of loose stones and vegetation rising into the air and swirling around them, sparks of electricity arcing between them.

The last two Death Eaters Disapparated as The Burrow collapsed into flaming rubble and Ron began running toward the fire. Harry and Hermione leapt forward and grabbed his arms. Molly Weasley insisted on staying in the house where she raised a family with her beloved Arthur. There was little doubt she had joined her husband and most of her children.

Harry pushed away the hands shaking him. His eyes snapped open and he saw Ron flinch back, his face lit by a bright green glow. There was a sharp pain in his mouth and he realized his jaws were grinding together and he'd bitten the inside of his cheek. The scream bottled up in his throat felt like a solid object, but he forced himself to slowly exhale. The green glow faded, though he couldn't see its source.

"Merlin, Harry! That must have been a bad one."

"It was," Harry croaked. "I was hoping I wouldn't yell this time," he muttered, looking around guiltily. He waited for a knock on the door and didn't relish having to explain this.

"You didn't," Ron reassured him. "I just woke up when my bed started rattling. What were you dreaming about that would make you do that?" he asked in a slightly awed and simultaneously worried tone.

Harry's nerves had been stretched to the breaking point, and that somehow put him over the edge. "I dreamed someone burned down The Burrow," he snapped, "with your mum still trapped inside, all right? I dreamed it happened and I had to stop you running in and burning to death as well and it was all my bloody fault! Is that what you wanted to know? Does that satisfy your curiosity?"

Ron stepped back from the bed, stunned.

Harry's stomach twisted at the look on his friend's face. *I had no bloody business taking out my miseries on him!* "I'm sorry, Ron. It was a bad one, but I didn't mean to snap."

Ron sat down on his bed, frowning. He looked at Harry thoughtfully, his eyes assessing him like a chessboard. "Harry," he said quietly. "Why do you have dreams like that?"

Harry sighed. "Ron, it's something I have to keep secret." His friend's frown deepened. "I trust you," he added, "more than you know, but I can't tell you until we take some precautions first. Remember that project Hermione is working on with regards to Snape?"

Ron nodded and his eyes narrowed. "It's him you're worried about finding out, isn't it?"

"Well, him and Dumbledore. I think the headmaster is doing something similar. Hermione thinks Snape is using legilimency on us, reading our minds and memories. I appear to be resistant to it, but she sent us a book that shows how to defend against it."

"That greasy git has been poking around in our minds?" Ron asked in a sick voice.

"It seems like it," Harry said. "And I have no doubt he'll use anything he finds against me, against us. I promise as soon as we can make your minds secure against him, I tell you and Ginny everything."

"What's Ginny got to do with this?" Ron asked suspiciously.

"More than you think. Besides, she's my friend as well... and do you think you can keep anything from her? She was asking me the same questions a month ago."

Ron shook his head ruefully as he lay back down. Soon he was snoring lightly. Harry waited a few more minutes and then quietly crept out of the room, stopping only to pick up his wand.

There were a lot of stairs at The Burrow, but Harry still remembered how to walk silently. The martial arts had improved his balance and agility, but the biggest components were patience and concentration. The only close call was just below the third landing, when a loose stair creaked under his foot at an alarming volume. But after freezing in place for over a minute, he heard nothing and continued.

He sat down on the couch in the darkened sitting room, wand in his hand. Between the doors, the stairs, and the Floo entrance, any invaders would have to get past him to reach any of the Weasleys. It was utterly ridiculous, but it still made him feel better. Harry slowed his breathing, trying to will the tension out of his body, when he heard a sound behind him. He leapt to his feet, spinning toward the disturbance and raising his wand in a single smooth motion.

Ginny's nightdress was barely visible as she shrank back toward the stairs. "H-Harry?" she whispered.

Harry jerked his wand back down and nearly fell over the couch. "Sorry," he whispered back, "You startled me." His knees were shaking in reaction, so he sat down before they gave out completely. He hoped the room was too dark for her to see his face.

With his back to her, he didn't feel as humiliated by his reaction. He'd nearly hexed her in her own living room. For the first time, he wondered if agreeing to live with the Weasleys might have been a mistake. He stared at his feet and tried to concentrate on controlling

his breathing. The last thing he needed to do was hyperventilate and pass out.

Even without looking, he was painfully aware of her presence as she came to stand beside him. "Harry, what's wrong?" she asked quietly.

"How did you know I was down here?" he evaded.

"I rigged the stair right below my landing. Fred and George's room is the floor below mine," she said as if that explained everything. On second thought, Harry reflected, it probably did. Her voice became even softer. "You don't have to say if you don't want to. I know what it's like to have everyone in your business."

Harry knew he did not want to shut her out; her least of all. She was standing so close he felt like he was being torn in two. "I had a bad dream. A very bad one," he said in a broken whisper. "When I get back tomorrow, I need to talk to you and Ron. It's... I can't..." his voice trailed off.

Harry barely felt her hand on his shoulder, its weight no more than a feather. He closed his eyes and swallowed. "That's fine, Harry," she whispered. "I remember what you wrote... and Ron wouldn't stop ranting about 'that greasy git.'"

She gave a soft laugh and glided back up the stairs like a ghost, her nightdress gleaming in the starlight coming through the windows.

Harry crept back up the stairs as dawn stained the windows red. Surprisingly, Ron was already stirring. When he was fully awake, they changed into shorts and t-shirts and soon were running through the damp morning air. Harry knew he was well off his normal pace, but Ron didn't say a word as they circled the property. While he appreciated his friend's considerate silence, he was annoyed to find any aftereffects from the beating. He gritted his teeth and pushed himself even harder, until he pulled up lame, cramps racing up his left calf.

"Bloody hell," he gasped as he dropped to a staggering walk. He tried to stretch out the muscles, but that only made him lurch in a grotesque manner.

“Damn Harry,” Ron said, jogging back. He’d gone several paces ahead before he realized Harry was no longer beside him. He helped Harry limp back to the kitchen.

Mrs. Weasley was starting to cook breakfast when they stumbled in. “Harry, what did you do to yourself?” she asked as she maneuvered him to a chair.

Harry really felt like banging his head on the scrubbed wood table. Instead he merely said, “Got a muscle cramp while running. Nothing serious just smarts a bit. A little ice should fix it.”

Mrs. Weasley just gave him an odd look and tapped the back of his leg with her wand. In seconds the cramp let go and he was able to flex his foot again. He let out a sigh.

“I should have guessed you were the one who got Ronald started on this morning running business,” she said.

Ron let out a snort. “First day of holidays, she came to wake me up for breakfast and thought I’d run away from home.”

“That wasn’t particularly funny, young man,” she said sternly. “Though I suppose it is good to know you are getting some nice healthy exercise while you’re away at school.”

Ron rolled his eyes at that, but was interrupted by his sister coming down the stairs.

“What’s all the racket about?” she asked, yawning. She snapped her mouth shut when she saw Harry. For his part, Harry suddenly became very busy rubbing the soreness out of his calf.

“Harry just pushed himself too hard on his morning run, the silly bugger,” Ron said with a grin.

Harry pushed away from the table and stood up carefully. There was a little lingering soreness, but nothing unbearable. “I’m fine,” he said.

“You shouldn’t push yourself so hard, dear,” Mrs. Weasley said in a worried tone. “You just got out of hospital yesterday.”



Harry found himself looking down. It was almost eerie how she could make him do that with just a few words. "I'm being careful with my neck, Mrs. Weasley; my leg was just sore because I haven't exercised it in a while."

"Can I go with you tomorrow?" Ginny asked suddenly.

Ron started to open his mouth, but Harry cut in first. "Sure," he said, trying not to notice her pleased smile.

Ron glared at Harry for a moment, but was quickly distracted when his mother placed a plate laden with fried eggs and sausages in front of him. Mrs. Weasley gave Harry a wink as she turned back to the stove. Harry tried to help, but she firmly shooed him back to the table, where he found himself sitting between Ginny and her brother. "Arthur had to head in to the office today - some sort of legal challenge at work. So I'll be taking you to Diagon Alley after you finish eating," she said brightly.

It felt odd to be sitting there waiting and not cooking. Harry supposed that was a reflex from his days with the Dursleys. His jaw tightened as he thought about his former guardians. He didn't even want to think of them as relatives. He looked forward to his meeting with Goldfarb, and almost missed the glare Ginny was giving her brother.

"I am not a stupid tag-along," she huffed.

"I just don't see why you suddenly decided you want to," Ron said, swallowing. "Maybe it's because *Harry's* running too?"

Harry had to suppress a growl; he did not want Ron teasing his sister about this. She was shy enough around him already. "I think it's rather a good idea."

Ron gave him a strange look.

"For the same reason Hermione joined us, Ron," Harry whispered.

"But... she's not..."

“She’s your sister and my friend. And she’s not going to be in our classes so we can’t always keep an eye out, can we?” Harry hissed under his breath. It was a low blow, Harry reflected as he watched Ron’s face get a little pale, but it worked. Mrs. Weasley sat plates in front of him and Ginny before sitting down herself. Ginny gave Harry a questioning look, but when he mouthed “later” she just nodded.

Despite his shortened run, Harry found himself ravenous, and finished his food almost as quickly as Ron. Before anyone could say anything, he stood up and began clearing his dishes. Mrs. Weasley started to open her mouth, but just shook her head, muttering to herself.

Ginny got up and helped him, but Ron went upstairs, looking a little upset. Ginny stared after her brother, but didn’t say anything. When the dishes were in the sink, Mrs. Weasley sent Harry upstairs to get ready for their trip.

He ran into the twins on the stairs. Fred and George were still yawning and rubbing at their eyes, but Percy’s door was still shut. Ron sat on his bed brooding as Harry tried to find some semi-presentable clothes in his trunk. He needed a quick shower before they left.

“Do you really think that’s going to happen?” his friend asked as Harry closed the trunk.

“I think it might. Look at how many scrapes we got into with the Slytherins last year. No one’s going to miss that she’s a Weasley... especially after she gets sorted into Gryffindor.”

Ron snorted. “I’d like to be that sure. Mum’ll have an eppy if she doesn’t. I just... don’t like thinking about someone...”

“Me neither, Ron,” Harry said firmly. “We’re going to train her up so if anything happens she’ll be the one inflicting the pain, yeah?”

“We may end up regretting that,” Ron said sourly. “She can be a nasty piece of work when she’s feeling narky.”

“That’s fine,” Harry said as he left the room, “we’ll just point her at Malfoy.”

Diagon Alley was quite busy for a Saturday morning. Ginny volunteered to help her mother with her errands, much to Mrs. Weasley’s surprise, while her brothers went out to the paddock to play Quidditch. Harry cast a longing glance at the back door, thinking of his broom upstairs in his trunk. *There’ll be plenty of time for that later. Besides, what I have to do at Gringotts may be almost as much fun.*

Ginny half-caught Harry when he stumbled out of the Floo, and he almost knocked them both to the floor of the Leaky Cauldron. “Er, thanks,” he muttered. His face was flaming because of where one of his hands ended up, but Ginny just smiled. *Thank Merlin Mrs. Weasley was facing the other way,* he thought with relief.

Harry kept his hair swept forward as much as possible to hide the scar on his forehead, and they were able to make it from the Leaky Cauldron to Gringotts with no incidents.

“Now Harry, you said you weren’t sure how long this business of yours would take?”

He shook his head. “I know what needs to be done, but it all depends on Goldfarb, really. I’d ask you to come, but he’s probably going to be a little leery about discussing details with someone else present; at least, until the hearing anyway.”

Mrs. Weasley nodded. “Well, we could wait here, but I’d like to get some things done while you are in there. If you get done before we return, would you stay in the lobby here?”

Harry nodded. “I’ll do that.” He watched them for a moment as they walked away. He tried to ignore the pang of worry that invaded the pit of his stomach. Slowly he turned and walked across the marble floor and introduced himself to one of the attendants.

After giving his name, Harry was ushered into a plushly furnished sitting room and asked if he wanted something to eat or drink. Harry

demurred politely and wondered at the change in treatment. After about five minutes, a different goblin led him to Goldfarb's office.

The portly goblin who managed his accounts looked visibly relieved when Harry walked into the room. "Mr. Potter, I'm glad to see you are recovering from your ordeal."

Harry frowned. "How did you know?"

The goblin cleared his throat. "With your guardianship in dispute, St. Mungo's sent the bill for their services to me, as executor of your estate. When I received it, I immediately made inquiries and discovered the gist of what happened. From what I understand, you received your injuries while under care of the muggles?"

Harry nodded slowly.

Goldfarb frowned, which with a goblin's features made him look truly frightening. "I would like to express my apologies for the time it took to acquire the requisite shares in Grunnings, LLC. Some of the parties holding shares were rather... difficult to negotiate with. However, we nonetheless failed to act in time to prevent your injuries."

Harry shook his head. "I badly misread the situation, Master Goldfarb. And your letter was sent before it happened... a third party was intercepting my post at that time."

Goldfarb's eyes grew intent at that last statement, but he didn't ask. "Mr. Potter, I presume you still wish to take action with regard to those shares?"

Harry grinned. "I do indeed. I no longer need leverage, but I wish to pursue what you originally thought my goal to be."

"Ah, vengeance," The goblin hissed, his answering grin was even more predatory than usual.

"Yes," Harry replied. "I'd like to use those shares to ensure that Vernon Dursley is sacked, but only after a thorough investigation of his actions at Grunnings. From what I remember overhearing, I think

he's guilty of at least minor transgressions involving his expense accounts. I'd like him to be publicly fired 'with cause'. And if their board doesn't want those shares sold at a discount to their competitors, they should make sure someone leaks that story to the Surrey Advertiser."

Harry smiled for a moment. He'd given this a lot of thought lying in his bed at St. Mungo's, especially after receiving Hermione's letter. Vernon and Petunia were obsessed with keeping up appearances, and such a story would devastate their shallow little souls. Goldfarb's answering grin was just as wicked.

"I believe their house mortgage is held at the Natwest branch in Little Whinging. See how interested they would be in selling the note. At that point Vernon will be out of work, which would be grounds to see about a foreclosure, wouldn't it?"

"That would depend on how the contract is written, but it's certainly worth investigating."

"Good. And a copy of the article from the Advertiser, along with the foreclosure notice if possible, should be forwarded to the Dean of Students at Smeltings School. That might be enough to get Dudley kicked out, especially if they suddenly have difficulty paying the tuition." He smiled at the thought of his cousin suddenly losing all his friends and having to go to Stonewall High.

The goblin stared at Harry for a moment. "I must admit I am surprised, Mr. Potter. When I saw the particulars on the invoice from St. Mungo's, I took the liberty of compiling a list of discrete removal specialists from Knockturn Alley. I would have thought that you would wish a more... permanent solution."

Harry was quiet for a moment. "I think that would be a little too quick, Master Goldfarb. As it is, I am inflicting their worst nightmare upon them. And if Mr. Dursley finds another position somewhere else, I can always repeat the process. I want to have some time to cool off before I do anything permanent. In five years, I will be seventeen and able to apparate and use magic freely. Then I will have the option of seeing how long my former guardians can survive under the Cruciatus curse."

His confession was a calculated move on Harry's part. Goldfarb was agreeing to use the Potter inheritance in ways that were slightly outside the limits of his powers as the manager. His casual mention of hiring assassins, something even more illegal, was a further revelation of vulnerability on his part. Harry could use the particulars of this discussion to have him instantly dismissed from his position.

Harry revealing plans that possibly included something far more illegal was a counter gesture that made the old goblin's eyes widen. It went beyond a tacit acceptance of the goblin's apology and was an expression of explicit trust.

"Mr. Potter, is there anything else Gringotts can do for you in pursuit of your most excellent vengeance?" Goldfarb leered. Harry remembered how the Gringotts survivors had spoken of revenge as an art form.

"That's all I can think of... though if you think of something or an opportunity comes up, I would take it as a personal favor if you would let me know."

Surprisingly, Goldfarb rose to his feet. "I will make sure to do so, Mr. Potter. I know you are busy, so I will not waste any more of your time."

Rather than be offended at the brusque dismissal, Harry was touched at the respect shown to him. Before, he'd left the goblin's office the minute their business was concluded, as a gesture of respect. Now Goldfarb sought to return that gesture. "Actually, there is something else," Harry said hesitantly. It was time to start acting instead of reacting.

Goldfarb sat back down, leaning forward a little.

"I am currently staying with the Weasley's, pending their confirmation as my legal guardians next week. That means when I am not attending Hogwarts I will be staying at The Burrow, their house near Ottery St. Catchpole. Now, I understand that funds can be released from the trust, as long as they are directly used for the safety and support of the Potter line, namely me. Is that correct?"

“In so many words, yes. There has to be a demonstrated need, and as executor I would need to sign off on it.”

“Good. When I agreed to go home with the Weasleys, it was on the condition that I was allowed to bear the cost of upgrading the security around The Burrow. You are aware of the circumstances surrounding my parents’ deaths?”

Goldfarb nodded and his eyes narrowed.

“Voldemort did not die that night. He currently exists in the twilight land between life and death. He has taken steps to ensure that he cannot at this time completely die. I was however able to prevent him from stealing something from Hogwarts that would have fully returned him to life... the object he tried to steal from vault seven thirteen last year.”

The portly goblin didn’t show any signs of surprise, other than going very, very still. “You are well informed, Mr. Potter.”

“I had a busy year. The point is that Voldemort will eventually find a way to return, and I am no doubt at the top of his list of wizards that need to die. I understand that Gringotts has some of the world’s most skilled magical security specialists and curse-breakers under contract. I’d like to see everything possible done to secure The Burrow from all intruders or hostile magic.”

Goldfarb looked troubled. “Mr. Potter, their services can be quite expensive.”

“Master Goldfarb, if I could trade the sum total of the Potter fortune to guarantee the safety of The Burrow and its inhabitants, I would do so in a second.”

“You know more than you are saying.” It was not a question, and a surprisingly blunt statement from the normally circumspect account manager.

Harry didn’t directly answer the question. “Voldemort will return. This past decade has been little more than the calm before the storm, and Gringotts will be as much a target as other institutions in the

wizarding world. Please warn your colleagues, but I would ask that my name be left out of it.”

“You tell me when you haven’t informed your own kind?” Goldfarb leaned back, visibly shocked.

Harry smiled sadly. “There are factions among my kind that are less than honorable, and that I cannot afford to trust yet. They would do well to emulate your clan, Master Goldfarb. We can go over the details after the hearing is over and the legalities are nailed down. I won’t waste anymore of your valuable time.” Harry got up and left the speechless goblin sitting in his chair.

Back in the lobby, Harry found an attendant to take him down to his personal vault, where he re-filled his money bag with galleons. A quick survey confirmed his estimation that he hadn’t really dented the funds at his immediate disposal.

When he returned to the lobby, Ginny was sitting on a bench by the door, kicking her feet and looking bored. Mrs. Weasley was not there, however.

“Oh, there you are, you just missed Mum,” Ginny said, standing up and smoothing her dress.

“What happened?” Harry asked warily.

“She got an owl from Percy, dropped a note on her head right in the middle of Madam Malkin’s. Some reporter showed up on the path to The Burrow asking if you were home. She said she was from the Daily Prophet, but Mum isn’t so sure about that. Anyway, she told me to tell you to stay here while she and Dad sort it out. He’s trying to get someone from the ministry down there to shut her up, at least until after the hearing. She’ll send Hedwig when it’s all clear.”

Harry let out a groan. “That bloody solicitor working for the Dursleys is behind this.”

“Language, Harry!” Ginny snapped.



Harry started to apologize, but then he noticed that she had a very impudent grin on her face. He settled for raising an eyebrow.

"It's good practice," she said. "Mum really will get after you if you say things like that. Or she will after the newness wears off." She smiled again.

"I suppose our little talk with Ron might be delayed," Harry said thoughtfully. He looked out past the marble pillars at the busy street. There was a lot of foot traffic, and Harry reminded himself that things were still pretty peaceful this early on. "Well, I have a few things I need to pick up," he said, "did your Mum specifically say we had to sit here in the lobby of Gringotts?"

Ginny frowned, concentrating. Slowly she shook her head and smiled mischievously. Harry patted his forearm. His wand was there, under the baggy sweatshirt. This early in the timeline, it should be completely safe. "Okay, let's make this quick then. I need you to stick close though, all right?"

She smiled and nodded.

Harry was looking forward to getting some clothes that actually fit, but he had another errand he needed to run first. As they left the lobby and walked down the steps, Harry jokingly offered Ginny his elbow. She raised her chin and adopted a very shushy expression on her face as she took his elbow; it was all Harry could do to keep from laughing out loud.

They hung a right as they stepped onto the crowded street. Passing Magical Menagerie, where he'd found Hedwig, and Gambol and Japes' joke shop, they finally came to Ollivander's.

"Is something wrong with your wand, Harry?" Ginny asked as he led them inside.

"No, but I understand it's your birthday next week."

"How did you... Harry, you can't! Mum will have a cow! She already polished up Grandmum Prewett's wand for me." No one ever accused Ginny Weasley of being slow on the uptake.

"It is my money after all. Besides it's a good investment... you know magic's harder to do if you don't have a wand that's suited to you, right?"

Ginny froze in place, her mouth half open. If his mind wasn't racing trying to keep up, Harry would have found the sight adorable. "I suppose if I don't agree you'll 'accidentally' break my wand too?" she said tartly.

"Ask me no questions, I'll tell you no lies," Harry smirked. "Seriously, it is your birthday, and this is a very practical gift. I don't want you going to Hogwarts with any handicaps."

Ginny peered up at him. When they stood this close, he actually realized how short she was. "Is this related to those things you can't talk about yet?"

Harry sighed and hung his head. It seemed like he was having to hide more and more from her these days. How long before she got sick of his evasions and told him to stuff it?

"I'll take that as a 'yes'," she said. Her hand was still on his elbow and she gave it a squeeze. "I know there must be a good reason. Don't worry, I do trust you."

Harry looked up and smiled. She was being far more forgiving than he'd expected. "Thank you. That means a lot to me. And if your Mum gets upset, she'll be mad at me, not you. It's not like she'd make you take back a birthday prezzie, yeah?"

Ginny laughed again, and let Harry pull her into the shop. Mr. Ollivander was his usual incredibly creepy self. Between his unblinking eyes, and the animated tape measure that kept wrapping itself around her, Harry was surprised Ginny didn't bolt from the store.

After about fifteen minutes, she waved a trial wand that shot forth a huge gout of red sparks. She rolled her eyes as Ollivander clapped his hands together with what was probably intended as a pleased expression. "Griffin feather and Hazel wood, nine inches but surprisingly strong, a very interesting combination from one of my

German colleagues. And you, Mr. Potter, is your wand performing well?"

Harry nodded slowly.

"Good, good... Phoenix feather and Holly, eleven inches and very supple. Great things will be done with that wand, mark my words."

"I hope my professors will agree, Mr. Ollivander," Harry said politely.

"Well, there are all kinds of tests, aren't there Mr. Potter?" Those moon-like eyes seemed to bore into Harry.

Harry gave a curt nod and paid for the wand. As soon as the galleons left his hand, he and Ginny were heading for the door.

Harry ducked into the second-hand robe shop next to Ollivander's. He'd originally planned to go to Madame Malkin's, but this place would do just as well. Deep down, he also didn't want to buy clothes that were noticeably newer or fancier than the Weasleys. It would make him feel awkward and might somehow sway people at the hearing.

He jokingly asked Ginny to help him pick, but she took to it with surprising seriousness. She frowned thoughtfully as he went through the racks of shirts and trousers. A couple of items he pulled out she put back immediately. "That's entirely the wrong shade of blue, Harry," she'd say, or "That bright a pattern will make your skin look washed out." For the most part though, Harry picked out darker colors, thinking of the sometimes poorly lit corridors at Hogwarts. The shirts were all long-sleeved – both to conceal his wand and the ugly doxy-bite scar on his forearm. He also found a plain black robe, with no school seals, to wear for the hearing, and some exercise clothes as well. Ginny chatted with the clerk while he picked up a few odds and ends from the bins, like new socks and underwear.

When they were done, he had a large stack of packages. He asked the clerk very politely if she could shrink them for him. The young woman smiled down at him as he counted out the galleons and reduced each of the parcels to the size of a deck of cards. Canceling the shrinking charm only required that he tap them with his wand. He

left a nice tip on the counter and stuffed the purchases into his pockets as they walked out. They hadn't been that long, but he wanted to get back to Gringotts as quickly as possible.

His fears turned out to be well-founded. Percy was standing on the steps in front of the bank, peering anxiously over the crowd. He began scowling as soon as he saw them.

"Where did you go?" he demanded furiously. "You were supposed to wait here!"

"We just went next door, Percy," Ginny said, "what's the matter?"

"Mum and Dad sent me to get you," he said pompously. "And I don't appreciate having to wait around half an hour trying to find you. Our parents will be furious!"

"I thought she meant stay at Diagon Alley until they'd got that reporter sorted out," Harry said smoothly. "And I wanted to get some decent clothes for the hearing at the Ministry. I don't want to embarrass anyone showing up in rags."

Ginny appeared very uncomfortable after that last statement, but it appeared to mollify Percy a bit. "I suppose Ginny may not have completely understood Mum," he conceded. "I need to get you two to the Leaky Cauldron immediately though. Mum tends to worry a lot." With that, he grabbed Ginny's arm and led them through the crowd.

When the Floo network spat him out at The Burrow, Harry managed to stay on his feet, though he did stagger a little.

"There you are!" Mrs. Weasley said. "I'm sorry we had a change of plans, dear. With that awful Skeeter woman here, it didn't seem like a good idea to give her any more information than she already had. You three were gone so long; you must be starving for lunch now." She turned toward the pantry as Percy spoke up.

"Well," he said in an irritated voice, "we'd have been back here ages ago if they hadn't decided to go wandering down Diagon Alley."

Ginny gave her brother a furious glare as Mrs. Weasley rounded on them.

“Ginny, I said for you and Harry to stay there! I don’t know what possessed you to go wandering! I thought you had better sense than that, you could have ended up on Knockturn Alley, or even worse!”

“Mrs. Weasley, if anyone is at fault it’s me. I already explained to Percy that I thought stay mean “stay on the Alley and don’t come back to The Burrow”. We just went a few doors down to get a couple of things. I didn’t want to be dressed like a ragamuffin for that guardianship hearing. The Ministry people might think you weren’t taking good care of me or something.”

“That’s not bad thinking,” Mr. Weasley said, walking in from the sitting room. “But it’s probably not a good idea to go off unsupervised. As you said, there are some people who might mean you harm.”

Harry nodded and pulled his wand out from his sleeve. “I did think about that, and if it wasn’t broad daylight with crowds of people I wouldn’t have moved a foot out of that lobby.”

“Harry,” Mr. Weasley said in an even voice. “I understand that you haven’t had anyone looking out for you for a while. You’ve been very alone. But that is no longer the case, and a twelve year old boy shouldn’t be traveling by himself.”

“I was with him, Dad,” Ginny protested.

“That makes it even worse, Ginevra. Something could have happened to you as well. If Harry is going to be a part of this family, he needs to understand that things are going to be different.”

Harry felt his stomach curdling. Arthur really was right. There was no risk to a thirty year old Harry who knew more curses than any Death Eater, but that was not how anyone saw him. To them, he was a somewhat precocious twelve year old who couldn’t even stop his muggle uncle from thrashing him... and he’d also risked their daughter’s safety. Arthur Weasley’s gravely concerned voice stung worse than Vernon’s bellowed threats or Snape’s sneered

accusations. "I'm sorry," he said miserably. "I just didn't want to make you have to go back out there again for some stupid clothes."

Harry was looking down, so when Arthur's hand came to rest on his shoulder, he jumped back. His hand came up automatically to block and knocked the surprised man's hand away.

"S-sorry," Harry mumbled. He hadn't consciously been expecting a blow, but his reflexes got the better of him. He barely noticed as Mrs. Weasley hustled a protesting Percy out of the kitchen.

"Harry," Arthur said, sitting down at the table. "We're not angry. We just want you to understand that we are here to help you with things. It's not a bother when we have to take you to Diagon Alley, and we'd much prefer that you did things with us, rather than trying to do everything for yourself. Now, no harm was done, and I think we've all learned something today. As I keep telling Perkins, 'Your intentions are good, we just need to work on the execution'."

Harry gave the man a faint smile, and soon Mrs. Weasley let everyone back into the kitchen and began making sandwiches.

As Harry chewed his sandwich, the small hard knot in his stomach slowly unraveled. Ron and the twins, red-faced from flying all morning, fell on their food like a pack of starving lions. Harry noticed the looks Ginny was giving Percy, and wondered what she had planned for her older brother. Living with a family that treated him like they cared was something he'd wanted all his life. It was funny though, how big an adjustment it was proving to be.

A/N

Okay, technically, this is going out at 1am Tuesday, my time. But it's still Monday night on the West Coast of the US, eh?

Yes, I know JKR said that Ollivander only makes wands with Dragon Heartstring, Unicorn Hair, or Phoenix Feather cores. Given the rarity of Phoenixes, and the number of combinations involved, it seems rather limited in terms of 'every wizard needs to find the wand that fits them'. Two or Three, multiplied by a couple dozen varieties of wood,

would hardly fill a shop. It wouldn't be the first time that the numbers don't seem to support the story.

However, if we posit the existence of other wandmakers, each making their foci using the available local ingredients, we return to the idea of the wand choosing the wizard, and Ollivander having a sufficiently varied inventory. All the various wandmakers do is ship their products to each other, for money or barter, to ensure that each member can always find *something* in their shop for that hard-to-suit eleven year old.

Comments:

The Dursley's aren't smart enough to pull one over on the Ministry. Their solicitor is. The Ministry can't just obliterate them because "Copies of these documents are being held by a number of other parties, with instructions to mail them to various Muggle publications the day the trial starts." So, Derments went for the easy solution...

There are three sources of conflict in this story: 'Man vs. Himself' is Harry mastering his emotions and horrific memories before they destroy him. 'Man vs. Man' is Harry versus Tom – enough said. 'Man vs. Nature' is Harry trying to change things around without getting caught or blindsided by an unsuspected consequence. The boundaries between these conflicts are a little hazy, as success or failure in one arena will impact the others... and if Harry completely loses in any of them, his goose is cooked.

I don't think Merged Harry will have any doubts about who he wants to take to the Yule ball. I don't imagine him putting up with a lot of nonsense from his friends either. Of course, you know someone or something is going to have to louse it up for everyone...

I think everyone wanting to queue up for some Dursley-Bashing will be happy with what Harry and Goldfarb have cooked up.

Despite Dumbeldore's words to Harry, I think someone whose had their life completely screwed over by prophecies is going to be bloody careful where they are concerned. And even if he doesn't necessarily believe them, that doesn't stop the Dark Tosser and company from acting on them and making them real.

Potterfanforever – I was referring to the first words she ever spoke directly in front of Harry. (It says as much in my copy of CoS.)

The wards around Privet drive went poof the instant the Dursleys gave up their guardianship rights over Harry. Dumbledore is aware and unhappy about it, but Arthur (and Molly) didn't give him much choice. Vernon being forced to let go of Harry in OOTP could also have been accidental/wandless magic on Harry's part as well. He's a good bit older and did a spot of wandless during the dementor attack.

Regarding Snape and his use of Legilimency in canon. There is a really well researched analysis in the hp-lexicon on this topic, linked off the section in Magic regarding legilimency. It goes scene by scene through the books where it seemed like Snape was using it on the students... reading that gave me a lot of food for thought and formed some of the background for this tale.

I've been experimenting with how to show scene breaks. This time I'm just going to go with the extra blank spaces and see how that uploads. Someone told me it was working again (i.e. not disappearing when you upload the file). If that's not the case I will re-upload with the X's.

Sorry Pink Corsair, no sympathy for Mountain Trolls. Their bogeys are highly toxic and pollute the environment, leading to the near-extinction of the crumple-horned snorkack in Great Britain.

The Dursleys could have tried to file claims on some of Harry's money, mostly for his (grudgingly given) upkeep. They do have a little leverage on Dumbledore – he needs Petunia's cooperation for the wards. Of course, that is all blown to heck now. I doubt anyone in the Wizarding world would even care to know about Harry's revenge, unless they were looking for ammunition to use against Harry.

Regarding Aikido – sure it helps to be stronger, but with a well done wrist-lock, for example, the difference in leverage is enough to make strength a non-issue for most match-ups.

Occlumency – the whole point of letting Hermione discover it is this: If Snape or Dumbledore uses legilimency on one of them before they perfect their shields, all they will know is that Hermione figured out



what Snape was doing and how to counter it. No risk of Harry's secrets escaping because he won't have to tell anyone anything until they have mastered occlumency.

Harry has planted information with Dumbledore that should at least get Sirius a hearing (his supposed dreams about hearing screams that Peter was the secret-keeper). He is also worried (as he says) that revealing Peter too soon might trigger Voldemorts eventual resurrection. (Trelawny only gave her prophecy hours before it happened in PoA.)

Well, time to post this up. I'm glad folks enjoyed the Hermione interlude. Let me know what you think of Harry's first day in the Weasley household...

-Matthew

## Chapter 15

After lunch, Mrs. Weasley put the boys to work degnoming the garden while Mr. Weasley puttered around in his shed. Ginny and her mother were going to the village to finish their shopping. Before they left, Harry made a trip to the bathroom and then ran up to his room. Before stowing the moneybag he extracted a handful of coins. When he came back down, Mrs. Weasley was alone, putting away the last of the dishes.

"Here," he said, handing her some galleons.

She frowned.

"It's for my share of the food this week," he said.

"Harry, you don't need to do that," she protested.

He sighed. "Mrs. Weasley, you did promise, remember?"

"Harry, that's very nice, but it's really not necessary."

Harry frowned. He didn't think he was going to have to re-fight this battle. "Mrs. Weasley, I appreciate everything you and your husband have done for me. But I'm really not going to feel comfortable about staying here if you won't let me help out a bit."

The matriarch of the Weasley clan gave him a long, measuring look. "Why is this so upsetting to you, Harry?"

He debated using his trump card, but his desire to avoid repeating this argument every week squashed his sense of fair play. "Well, my aunt and uncle were always after me about being a freeloader. I couldn't tell them about my vault, or else they'd have taken it all, but it always stung that they were just a little bit right about me."

Mrs. Weasley's face got a little red, and her mouth opened to say something. But she stopped herself and took a deep breath. "All right, Harry, if it will make you feel better, but only two galleons. I don't think you realize how much a galleon is worth, but that is more than enough to cover what you could possibly eat."

“Money sitting in a vault isn’t doing anyone any good,” he replied, shrugging.

“Harry, you might need that money some day. You really need to think about your future.”

“I do,” he said softly. He was proud that there was no tremor in his voice, but she still looked at him oddly. He beat a hasty retreat to the garden and began flinging gnomes with Ron and the twins. Percy begged off, saying he had something to work on, and stayed up in his room. That would later prove to be a mistake.

“So, what do you plan?” Ron asked Harry as he spun a gnome around and heaved it over the hedge.

Harry blinked. “What do you mean?” He’d been eying a beetle crawling through the dirt with some suspicion. Fortunately, it didn’t have any unusual markings around its eyes.

“About Percy.”

“Ron, full sentences and the Queen’s English, please,” Harry said as he grabbed another gnome.

The youngest Weasley boy rolled his eyes while his older brothers snickered. “What are you planning to do to get even with Percy?”

“For what?”

“Harry,” Ron said, aghast. “He ratted you out to Mum and Dad!”

Harry shrugged, uncomfortable at being reminded about the scene with Mr. Weasley. “Well, I was being kind of stupid.”

“You didn’t do anything that bad,” Ron disagreed. “Besides, that prat couldn’t wait to get you in trouble! If you aren’t going to do anything about, then I will. He gets away with that, he’ll be worse on the rest of us.”

Harry was a little surprised. He remembered the tension between Percy and his family, and how he never really got on very well with

his brothers. He hadn't realized that the rift ran back this far or this deep. He pondered this until his thoughts were interrupted by the twins.

"While normally we'd agree—"

"-- with anything that involves punishment—"

"-- for Perfect Prefect Percy—"

"Impressive, that. Can you say it three times fast?"

"Back on topic o' brother of mine!"

"Right, sorry. While normally we'd agree—"

"We can't let you do it, Ron."

Ron scowled at the twins. "And why not?"

"Because ickle Gin-Gin called it first."

"Brings a tear to my eye, George."

"That it does, Fred."

"Ginny?" Ron asked incredulously.

"If you didn't notice," Fred said, fixing Ron with a gimlet eye. "Mum gave her a bit of a talking to while they were clearing up and Harry was upstairs. She went on about how Ginny needs to not encourage Harry to take her places and not take advantage of him being a nice bloke."

Harry winced, thinking about the wand he'd bought her. Mrs. Weasley didn't know about it. Not yet.

"By the time Mum was done with her," George continued, "Ginny looked like she was going to cry. So when she followed us out here, we were prepared to offer brotherly comfort."

“Of course, she wanted none of that,” Fred chuckled. “She’d just put on a face like a wet weekend to satisfy Mum. She came out to see us on calling dibs, and for some... er,”

“Technical advice?” George supplied helpfully.

“Yes, quite,” Fred agreed. “Anyway, I took her up to our room and we discussed some possibilities.”

“While I distracted Mum,” George interjected.

“And quite nicely too,” Fred agreed amiably. “Anyway, she gets first shot at the berk. Now, if she muddles it—“

“Fat chance of that, o brother of mine.”

“Indubitably; but if she does, then we’ll let you take a crack at him.”

“How come you two aren’t queuing up for the opportunity?” Harry asked, grinning for the first time since he’d returned from Diagon Alley.

“Well, it’s not much fun anymore—“

“Not terribly much anyway. We’ve done—

“Just about everything we can think of.”

“Though if a new opportunity shows itself—“

“--rest assured we will pursue it post-haste.”

Harry chuckled as they returned to routing the gnomes from Mrs. Weasley’s vegetables. When they were done, they got their broomsticks out and played a little two on two Quidditch. While Harry was a good flier, he couldn’t throw a Quaffle to save his life. The twins absolutely destroyed him and Ron.

It didn’t help that Harry often found his eyes wandering toward the two-track lane that eventually led to the village. He wasn’t completely aware of what he was doing until he saw a heavily-laden Mrs.

Weasley and Ginny return. A heartfelt sigh of relief made Harry chide himself for his paranoia.

They reluctantly called a halt to the game as the light failed. Locking the brooms up in the shed, the four of them walked back to The Burrow. Harry noticed Ginny was rather quiet through dinner, though she did shoot a few glares Percy's way. He wasn't sure if anyone else noticed, but the normally boisterous family was a trifle subdued.

He jumped up to help Ginny clear the dishes, avoiding Mrs. Weasley's eye. Unfortunately, Ginny didn't say much either, and when they were done she retired to the couch with a book. Harry let Ron talk him into a game of Wizarding Chess.

Harry's abysmal play rose to new heights of incompetence that evening. Between his resentment over the aftermath of the Diagon Alley trip and Ginny's silent treatment, he was barely able to remember how the pieces moved. After losing his queen, Harry stretched, twisting his neck back and forth. That gave him an excuse to look toward the couch. Ginny looked up just then and their eyes met. She frowned and looked down at her book.

Three moves later was checkmate. Harry shook his head when Ron asked him if he wanted a re-match. He went upstairs to go to bed.

Instead of biting back a scream, Harry awoke with a sad sigh. He stared up at the ceiling of Ron's room and blinked rapidly. His dream had been a replay of his last conversation with Ginny, the night after Bill and Fleur's wedding.

His reasoning had been so sure, so logical. The fact that he didn't want to leave her was just his own selfish desire, right? She'd be in horrible danger if Voldemort knew how much he loved her. She couldn't Apparate yet and was too young to even practice it legally. He wouldn't be able to concentrate if she was in danger.

All those were valid reasons why he left her there at The Burrow. In the end, his head told him he was doing the right thing while his heart was breaking into pieces. The sight of her standing there, her heart in her eyes but refusing to cry was burned into his memory. He said

goodbye and kissed her softly, promising to return to her. And then he left her, and all his dreams, behind.

He'd tried not to cry then, but now he let the tears come. He wept silently for what had been lost, and raged at himself for his stupidity. He'd let her down that day, and she died slowly, painfully, knowing he'd broken his promise to her.

Harry rolled onto his side and curled up into a ball. He couldn't stop shaking – the dream had felt so real that he wondered if his entire journey into the past had just been an elaborate delusion. Had he truly died in the scorched ruins of number four, Privet Drive? Maybe hell is coming back and realizing that these weren't the same people, not really.

He had no logical reason to expect *this* Ginny to understand him. True, she'd been one of the few people to truly know him in the future, but that Ginny was dead and gone. Even his efforts to intervene were making this one different.

Harry gritted his teeth, disgusted with the tide of self-pity he found himself wallowing in. This wasn't about *him*, this was about *them* – making the people he cared about safe in this reality. When all was said and done, and all his manipulations were revealed, they'd likely want nothing more to do with him. He was no better than Dumbledore, manipulating the people around him 'for the greater good' without consulting them first. He remembered how angry he'd been when he first heard the entire prophecy. He had no idea at the time that he'd eventually prove to be a complete hypocrite.

Anger did what no amount of self-control could do, and dammed the flow of tears. Eventually his breathing slowed and he got control of himself.

*Well, there's no way in hell I'm getting back to sleep after that,* Harry thought with a sigh and pulled on his dressing gown. He slipped out of the room and down the stairs to the hall bath to wash his face. That made him feel better, but even more wide awake.

The clock in the hallway told him it was nearing four in the morning. Sitting and listening to Ron snore for hours was not how he wanted to

start the day. He ended up heading down to the sitting room again, hoping he could at least stretch out on the couch.

Padding down the stairs, he took special pains to avoid the loose stair right below Ginny's landing. He didn't want to wreck her sleep two nights running; she seemed annoyed enough at him already.

Like before, the darkened sitting room seemed oddly peaceful. He sat on the couch and took a deep breath, trying to relax. He was finally starting to loosen up a little when he noticed hints of motion outside the darkened windows.

Harry was on his feet in an instant, pulling the wand from inside his dressing gown. He kept the lights off as he crept up to the door. He eased the ancient latch open slowly enough to avoid any noise and slipped outside. The grass was slightly damp under his bare feet as he slipped around the garden and toward the orchard. Something large was moving quickly through the air, but it wasn't until it flashed past a patch of dimming moonlight that he saw a flash of red and made the connection.

Harry sighed, releasing the breath he'd been holding. He turned and started walking toward the door when he heard a gasp. "H-harry?" Cursing silently, he turned back around.

She hovered above him, wearing a t-shirt and a pair of shorts, the moon painting silvery highlights in her hair. *This isn't my Ginny*, Harry reminded himself again. But he knew that wasn't completely true. If the words of his future self were honest, then he was still partially of this reality, and this was partially 'his' Ginny. But that still didn't mean she would mean the same to him, would it?

His thoughts chased one another as he stared at her, barely registering when she brought her brother's broom to the ground. It was only the stricken and guilty look on her face that snapped him out of his reverie. "I-I told you I borrowed my brother's brooms sometimes, so I would at least know how to fly before I got to Hogwarts. D-don't worry, I wouldn't touch yours."

Harry frowned in confusion. "Go ahead and use the Nimbus if you want, I don't mind."



“No!” she snapped and shook her head violently. She sniffed quietly and Harry realized she was suppressing tears. She picked angrily at a splinter on the end of the broom handle.

“What did your Mum say, Ginny?” he asked softly.

She looked at him sharply, lips pressed together in a tight line that reminded him of Professor McGonagall.

“The twins don’t miss much,” he explained. “I won’t hold her words against you. Did she blame you for us not staying at Gringotts?”

She nodded and took a deep breath. “All right, if you must know... she said that I shouldn’t take advantage of you. She said you lost your parents when you were a baby, and now you’d lost another family, and that you were in this, you know, fragile state. She said that you had to be desperately lonely and that you would do anything to have people that cared about you. She said you probably saw your money as a way to get people to like you, and that you were likely to offer to spend it on us to ‘make sure we liked you’ after the way the Dursleys treated you. She-she said I was an awful person if I took advantage of that.”

“And you immediately thought about the wand.” It wasn’t a question.

She nodded. “I didn’t say anything because I knew you’d be mad I told... and I didn’t want to start another row right after Dad talked to you. But I feel really guilty now. I never should have let you...”

“Bollocks!” Harry snapped. He knew Mrs. Weasley meant well, but she’d really hurt Ginny with her words. “Are you a whore?”

Ginny’s head snapped up and for a moment Harry thought she was going to slap him. Still, angry Ginny was easier for him to deal with than that stricken look she’d been wearing. “How can you say such a thing?” she hissed.

“Are you for sale?” he asked coldly. “Because the girl I’ve been writing to all last year isn’t. She didn’t write all those letters complaining about having old clothes, or trying to get me to buy her presents. You helped me at King’s Cross and agreed to write when I

was just another scroungy-looking first year. It was *my* idea to leave Gringotts and it was *my* idea to get you a new wand. Your Mum was right about some things and dead wrong about others. Maybe I am lonely. Maybe I do think you Weasleys are a brilliant lot. Most of the time, anyway. But I'm not daft enough to think I can buy you off... at least not with Galleons."

Ginny swallowed, her anger forgotten. "What do you mean by that?" she asked, her voice little more than a whisper.

"A different type of coin is needed... friendship, caring, trust – though I haven't done too well with the last one it seems." He frowned. "Ginny, if you hadn't pushed your brothers to come get me when you did, there's a good chance I'd be dead right now. I made a mistake and almost paid for it with my life, only you and your brothers saved me from my own stupidity. Next to that, a pile of galleons means nothing at all. Please, Ginny, don't let what your Mum said make you second-guess yourself. I trust you, so please trust yourself."

She let out a sigh, but he noticed her shoulders relaxed a bit. "You know Mum is going to pitch a fit when she sees that wand."

"I'll deal with it."

"Dad will probably agree with her."

Harry sighed. "He was right when he got after me yesterday. But I think I can handle it if I know I'm in the right this time."

She looked at him curiously.

Harry smiled. "If we were at Hogwarts, and you saw someone sneaking up behind me with a wand, getting ready to curse me, what would you do?"

"I found this spell written on the flyleaf of one of Uncle Gideon's old schoolbooks. It's called the Bat-Bogey Hex and it sounds absolutely gruesome... I figure I might try that out on them."

Harry smiled, nodding. "And that's what I'll argue. Your parents and I have a little agreement we made while I was in St. Mungo's regarding security expenses. I think I can skate on that."

Ginny looked thoughtful. "This is all rather odd, isn't it? Are you really expecting that many problems?" Her voice took on a slightly worried tone. It hurt, a little, to hear it coming from such a young girl.

Harry sighed. "We never did get to have that long talk with Ron yesterday, did we? We definitely need to make the time for it today. Have you been up all night?"

Ginny shrugged. "Almost. I got a couple of hours, but I wasn't sleeping well." She looked at Harry's pyjamas and dressing gown. "You're up early as well. Do you have trouble sleeping?"

"A bit," Harry agreed ruefully. "It's sort of tied in with other things." Ginny looked confused but didn't press. "Are you hungry? If you want to stow that broom, I can throw something together."

Ginny nodded happily and Harry went inside and turned up the lamps in the kitchen.

Mrs. Weasley was a little shocked when she came downstairs to find breakfast almost ready. Harry waved off her protests, saying he wanted to practice some of the household magic Ginny had been teaching him about. Most magical stoves required a tap from a wand to activate, which protected young children, but since it didn't involve actual spell-casting it didn't count as under-age magic.

Harry cracked a couple of eggs into the frying pan, and then pulled a tray of muffins from the oven as the yolks sizzled. Ginny poured her mother a glass of chilled pumpkin juice. She'd had time to cool off from their conversation, and it probably helped that he'd reassured her that he didn't think Mrs. Weasley had said those things to be hurtful.

Working together to prepare a meal had been a strangely comforting experience. Cooking for the Dursleys had been a solitary occupation, save for when his aunt decided to stand over him and criticize his efforts or yell at him to go faster. Ginny worked around him as he

manned the stove, handing him ingredients as he needed them and bringing food to the table as soon as he'd plated it up. All the while she sang along with the Wizarding Wireless Network under her breath. Not once did they get in each other's way nor was there a single miscue during their strange duet. Harry found it oddly relaxing and a small part of him began looking forward to the Yule Ball.

The other Weasleys gave him some odd looks as they came down. Mr. Weasley was rather amused, and peppered Harry with questions about Muggle cooking. Percy just blinked at his mother's fond smile and sat down, frowning. The twins sniggered at "ickle Harrikins and Gin-Gin" until Ginny 'accidentally' spilled a gout of hot tea on Fred's lap. Ron looked at Harry thoughtfully, then shook his head and scowled.

"What's the matter?" Harry asked Ron quietly as he and Ginny finally sat down with their plates.

"How long you been up, mate?"

Harry shrugged. "A few hours."

"You're not sleeping again, are you?"

"I'm fine, Ron," Harry said flatly.

"No, you're bloody well not!" Ron snapped, his voice raising.

"Ronald Bilius! Language!" Mrs. Weasley scolded.

"Harry, tell Mum how much sleep you've really been getting."

"I'm getting enough," Harry said defensively. "I did hardly anything but sleep at St. Mungo's."

"Well, what was your excuse at school then?"

Harry opened his mouth to retort when Mr. Weasley cut in. "Let's not argue at the table. Harry and Ginny worked hard to make us all a nice breakfast, let's not waste that squabbling."

Ron looked down at his eggs as the table grew quiet. The silence was broken only by the clink of silverware on plates, until Percy let out a sudden cough.

The third oldest Weasley son's eyes had gone wide behind his horn-rimmed spectacles. They bulged as he let out a high-pitched squeak and he leapt awkwardly to his feet. Percy ran out of the kitchen and up the stairs with an odd, stiff-legged gait.

The twins looked at each other and started sniggering. Mrs. Weasley glared at them, but they just shrugged and tried to look innocent. Ron looked confused and Mr. Weasley just ignored it. It wasn't until Harry caught a ghost of a smile on Ginny's lips that he got an inkling of what happened.

Percy returned to the table several minutes later, red-faced and refusing to speak. Mrs. Weasley let him be after a couple of minutes and they finished Sunday breakfast in peace. Harry automatically began clearing the dishes when they were done, but Mrs. Weasley shooed everyone out of the kitchen.

Harry caught Ron's eye and motioned for the boy to follow him. Ginny tagged along as well. Harry picked up a small black book from the end-table in the living room before heading out the door. Ron looked questioningly at his sister, but she ignored him as Harry led them out to the orchard.

It was a pleasant morning. The sun was shining and there was a light breeze blowing. Harry thought about the ever-present storm clouds that hovered over the ruins of Hogwarts and shuddered.

They sat down on the gnarled roots of an ancient apple tree. This patriarch of the grove had a small clearing around it, and its boughs spread wide enough to offer plenty of shade. Harry looked around closely, but didn't see anyone else around. The fact that Rita Skeeter had been out here yesterday made him nervous, but he didn't see any strangely attentive beetles either. Ignoring the odd looks he was getting from Ron and Ginny, Harry closed his eyes and rubbed his temples like he had a headache. He focused on his Legilimency, casting around him for any other minds. Ron's presence was

radiating a bit of anxiety, but Ginny's was oddly serene. Harry pulled back sharply, wary of invading their privacy.

"Harry?" Ron's voice made him open his eyes. He didn't really have any business getting frustrated with his friend. He was keeping a lot from him, and what he did reveal would have anyone with half a brain worried.

"All right. Yes, Ron, there is something going on. There is a lot going on. I want to tell you both about it, but I can't right now. It's not," he said quickly seeing Ron start to scowl, "a matter of whether I trust you. I do. I trust the two of you as much as I trust anyone. I know you'd never willingly betray me or repeat anything I told you in confidence. It's more a matter of whether you'd be allowed to keep those secrets."

Harry held up the book, *Occlumency: the Hidden Arte*. "Hermione came through for us. She figured out what Snape has been doing. It's called Legilimency, and it lets him read minds, and go through peoples' memories. That's how they found out about the restricted section."

Ron sat back on his haunches. "But I thought Professor Dumbledore warned you off?"

"I think they are both in on it, or at least sharing information. I've also gotten that weird feeling around Dumbledore at times. It stopped when I started freaking out and mentioned that I was thinking about moving to France and transferring to Beauxbatons."

Ron looked sick. "Dumbledore? He, he wouldn't do that..." his voice trailed off.

Ginny's eyes had gone wide and she appeared to be even more upset. "You'd do that?" she whispered. "Move to France, I mean?"

Harry kicked himself. He looked her square in the eyes and tried to give her an encouraging smile. "Not unless I could take you all with me," he joked. "I was bluffing."

"How can you bluff someone who can read your mind?" Ron asked, shaking himself.

"Because he can't read mine," Harry explained. "Something in my past has made it almost impossible to use Legilimency against me." *Like me learning Occlumency*, he thought as they glanced at his scar.

"So will that book make it possible for us to block him out as well?"

"I hope so."

"Good, the idea of that greasy git poking his big hooked nose around in my head is right disgusting."

Ginny spoke up. "How will we know when we are doing it right?"

"Well, I'm going to be working on Legilimency, and seeing how good I can get with that. If I'm doing well with it, and I can't get past your Occlumency, then you are probably safe."

"Right. Then let's get started," Ron said firmly.

*That was easier than I thought it would be*, Harry reflected as he opened the book to a page he'd marked with a scrap of parchment. His friends were very attentive as he began explaining meditation and the exercises they would use to organize their minds.

The exercises were difficult, and by the time they went inside for lunch, Ron and Ginny both seemed to be nursing headaches. The methods of teaching used in the book were far different from his tutelage with Snape, but Harry couldn't help but imagine they would make better progress than he did.

Lunch was unusually quiet, with Ron and Ginny almost wholly engrossed in their food, and Harry in a pensive mood as well. Percy had evidently decided to eat in his room, and Mrs. Weasley seemed to alternate between being proud of his dedication to his studies and concerned he was working too hard. She asked absent-mindedly what Harry and Ron had been up to.

"Project for school," Harry answered quickly. "Something Hermione came up with."

"Is she that Muggle-born witch in your year?" Mrs. Weasley asked.

“Yeah, she’s insanely clever, too,” Harry answered.

“I’m glad you all did so well in your studies,” she said. “That goes for you as well, Ronald,” she added when her youngest began to colour slightly. “I hope Ginny will follow your example this fall.”

Harry shrugged. “We were all within a couple of points of each other. I think Ginny will easily do as well, if not better. Hermione takes the best notes and she keeps everything, so she’ll already have first year in the bag.”

Ginny’s eyes got wide, but Mrs. Weasley frowned. “I’m not sure that would be entirely appropriate,” she said in a disapproving voice.

“I don’t think anyone should be forced to sit through any more of Professor Binns’ lectures than strictly necessary. Besides, it’s an accepted practice in Muggle schools and it’ll free up time for other projects. There are a lot of subjects covered in the Hogwarts’ Library that never even get mentioned in the regular classes.”

Mr. Weasley smiled slightly at the mention of the ghost who taught History of Magic. Harry wondered if the man had been teaching when Mr. and Mrs. Weasley attended Hogwarts, and if he’d been a ghost then. “I suppose it wouldn’t hurt, as long as Ginny did her own home work. What sort of projects are you talking about?”

“Well,” Harry said quickly, “right now we’re working on an independent study project dealing with magical defences and means of detection. Hermione found an old book that we’re studying to see what modern applications it may have. Nothing too spectacular,” he added in a bored tone, “but potentially interesting.”

Fortunately, that proved to be enough to reassure Mrs. Weasley and they made it through lunch. What he didn’t count on was Fred and George. No sooner were he, Ginny, and Ron settling down around the tree than the twins walked up, smiling.

“Very smooth, ickle Harrikins. Wasn’t it, Fred?”

“Twas indeed, oh brother of mine,” Fred replied.



“You eased that one right by Mum—“

“--but not us. So out with it.”

Harry eyed the twins for a moment. He hadn't gotten to know them too well until almost his fourth year, but the way things were escalating this time... There was also the fact that they'd saved his neck in that last Quidditch match. He let out a sigh, hoping he wouldn't regret this later. “You two ever notice how hard it is to pull the wool over Snape's eyes?”

“Right suspicious bastard he is,” George agreed.

“Makes it more of a challenge!” Fred responded with a grin.

“I think it's more than that,” Harry said, gesturing with the book. “We noticed a few things, but Hermione put it all together. Snape's using a special type of magic called Legilimency that lets him read minds and go through your memories. He used it one too many times and gave himself away, so she found this book on Occlumency. Among other things, mastering Occlumency will help you protect against mental assaults like Legilimency.”

“Hermione Granger figured all of that out?” George asked, eyebrows rising.

“We have got to recruit her, oh brother of mine!” Fred chortled. “With her brains, can you imagine the pranks we'd pull?”

“You leave her alone!” Ron snapped, scowling.

The twins jumped and gave their younger brother a long look. Harry was a little surprised as well. The Ron he remembered wouldn't have given himself away like that, not even under threat of Cruciatus. Of course, Ron was acting a lot more protective, both toward Harry and others. *Was he just embracing that whole ‘Gryffindors take care of their own’ thing, or was this something deeper?*

“Looks like Ron wants to thrash us,” George said slowly.

“Think he fancies her a bit?” Fred asked slyly.

Harry decided to take a gamble. "Well of course he does. Not that you two had a chance. She wanted to hex you for giving him that fake spell to turn Scabbers yellow." Ron's face went almost purple and he was unable to speak. Ginny's eyes danced merrily, but a pleading glance from Harry made her keep her silence. "Speaking of dirty tricks," he said, changing the subject, "what happened to Percy this morning?"

Ginny's grin became wider. "Nothing much... I just borrowed a defective potion from Fred."

George looked at his twin. "That shrinking solution that didn't brew right?"

Fred shrugged. "It works if you get it warm enough, that's why we saved it from Snape."

"Not that we've found a use for it," George said sceptically.

Fred shrugged. "So I let Ginny have it. If she finds a use, she owes us a favour."

"Which I think was more than paid off by this morning's entertainment," she replied tartly.

Ron couldn't contain himself any more. "But what did you do with it?" he asked in a plaintive tone.

Ginny shrugged theatrically. "I soaked a pair of his grundies with it. Body heat was more than enough to activate it."

The glade went dead silent as the boys cringed.

"It doesn't pay to get scrotty with the person that does your laundry, now does it?" Ginny asked loftily.

"Well Ron, do you still think Percy needs further punishment?" Harry asked slyly. Ron shook his head silently, looking a bit green. George didn't say anything, but handed a sickle to a smug-looking Fred.

“Well, now that’s settled, how do we go about stopping Snape from bugging around in our brains?” Fred asked.

Harry smiled and opened the book as the twins sat down cross-legged on the grass. “The first step is learning to meditate. It’s a special form of concentration...”

Harry felt pretty good about their progress that afternoon. Ron and especially Ginny were a little discouraged, but he knew that the first stages were slow going for people who had no background in the mental disciplines. The twins were naturally competitive, and welcomed any sort of learning that would improve their pranking capabilities.

Working with his friends reminded Harry of his time leading the DA. Working with students, teaching them duelling techniques and curses had been oddly satisfying. In the quieter moments of the second war, Harry wondered if he’d have made a good teacher. Perhaps in a kinder, quieter world with no prophecies and no Dark Lords, he might have.

He felt a nudge in his ribs. “All right, Harry?” Ron asked.

Harry shook his head ruefully. “Just daydreaming.”

After dinner they moved to the sitting room and continued working on the meditation exercises. Each of them had a book open in their laps, and Mrs. Weasley looked on approvingly. Harry tapped into his Legilimency a few times to check, and was dismayed at the volume of thoughts and emotions still radiating from them. He wondered if growing up in a place like The Burrow might make it harder for them to learn to conceal their thoughts. By the time they went to bed, Harry wasn’t the only one who had a headache.

Monday morning they woke up early as planned. As he and Ron crept down the stairs in their sweats, Harry was pleased to see Ginny sitting in the kitchen with a glass of pumpkin juice. She was dressed in a t-shirt and shorts and rubbing her eyes with her knuckles. “Morning Ginny,” he said quietly.

She jumped, almost knocking over her juice, but smiled blearily at him. “M-m-morning Harry,” she yawned.

Ron just grunted and got a drink of water before heading out the door. Harry and Ginny followed him out for the morning run.

After Harry pointed out the likelihood of Ginny needing to know how to defend herself, Ron’s objections faded away. That didn’t, however, stop him from setting a brutal pace. Harry was a little more careful with his leg this time, and kept an eye on Ginny as well.

Surprisingly, she kept up with little trouble. As she found her pace, her hair began to stream behind her like a crimson banner. Harry found himself slowing a little, allowing her to pass him. After they’d done a full circle of the property, Ron led them to the paddock. Harry slipped back into his instructor mode, and began showing Ginny the basic stances while Ron worked on his forms.

The youngest Weasley was an attentive student and Harry was pleased with her progress when he left her to practice and began sparring with Ron. His stay in the hospital was more than enough to give Ron an edge and Harry found himself really pushing himself to keep up. When he mistimed a block, Ron’s kick landed solidly and sent Harry staggering backwards with the wind knocked out of him.

Ginny looked outraged, but Harry just let out a wheezing chuckle. “Good one, mate.”

On the next exchange, Harry ducked under Ron’s punch and swept his feet out from under him. Ron let out a squawk as he tumbled to the ground. Nursing a bruise, his friend scowled as Harry went over how to fall without hurting one’s self. Surprisingly, Ginny was the first to get it right, but then again she was also smaller and lighter. Harry remembered how good she would be at Quidditch and smiled.

The twins woke up in time to join them for Occlumency practice. When everyone began to get headaches, they switched back to martial arts. Harry didn’t know if alternating would help or not. He knew that some schools of martial arts advocated meditation as a means of centring oneself, but he didn’t know if that would apply in

this situation or not. By late afternoon, everyone was exhausted, mentally and physically.

While Ron was napping, Harry opened his trunk and took out the thin box that contained Ginny's new wand. He took a scrap of parchment and bit of string and wrapped the box up. Ginny's birthday was tomorrow, the eleventh, and he wanted to have it ready in time for the party. He wasn't looking forward to her mother's reaction, but he knew they needed to get some things settled. His guardianship hearing at the Ministry was scheduled for the day after.

After dinner, they decided to forgo any more practicing. Ron settled for trouncing Harry at chess while Ginny watched with amusement. Mr. Weasley was stretched out near the fire, dozing with the Daily Prophet unfolded in his lap. He only stirred when a muffled boom echoed down the stairway from the twin's room. Mrs. Weasley, knitting something out of blue yarn, just sighed and shook her head.

Harry stretched and yawned to hide a happy smile. He couldn't remember ever feeling this comfortable. He tried not to think about the hearing. He hoped his wishes would be given some weight in the proceedings, but after finding out about Sirius he had little faith in the Ministry's justice. His sleep that night was fitful at best.

Ginny's eleventh birthday party was a small family affair, though that was a bit of an oxymoron where the Weasleys were concerned. Mrs. Weasley baked a huge cake. Ginny was smiling and blushing at being the centre of attention, and she didn't seem to have a care in the world.

Ron got his sister a red and gold scarf 'so she can wear it to Quidditch matches and cheer on Gryffindor'. Harry had to suppress a smile. He remembered her wearing it while *playing* for Gryffindor in her fifth year. Fred and George got her an old toy broom, sized about right for a toddler. She looked moderately annoyed until she found the three galleon coins stuck amongst the twigs, then she laughed realizing it was a joke. Percy got her a nice quill, for which she thanked him politely. Charlie sent her some tiny mittens with warming charms, along with a long note reminiscing about her visit to the

dragon preserve. Bill sent her a scarab brooch that glinted oddly in the firelight.

When Ginny opened her present from Harry, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley exchanged a look. Mrs. Weasley didn't say anything, but her eyebrows creased together. At the twin's urging, Ginny picked up the wand and waved it. A gout of red sparks poured from the end, sending motes of light bouncing through the kitchen. Fred and George cheered, but quickly subsided under their mother's withering gaze.

When everyone finished their cake, Harry got up and helped clear the dishes before anyone could object. He wanted to make sure he stayed near Ginny before Mrs. Weasley started in on her. She gave each of her sons a look, and they excused themselves from the kitchen with slightly worried expressions. Ginny didn't say anything, but Harry noticed the muscles at the back of her jaw tightening up. He felt Mrs. Weasley's eyes on him, but Harry avoided her gaze as he collected the silverware.

Mr. Weasley didn't look very pleased either, and as his eyes travelled from his wife to his daughter he let out a sigh. "That was quite a display wasn't it?" he asked quietly.

Mrs. Weasley's frown deepened. "Harry, if you'll excuse us, we need to talk to Ginny."

Harry finished rinsing off a plate and wiped his hands with a dish towel. "If this is about the wand, I don't think that would be a good idea. I promised Ginny I would talk to you if there was a problem."

Mrs. Weasley grimaced and gave her daughter a furious look before she turned back toward Harry. "Harry, I understand things have been difficult for you, but you mustn't let-

"I'm sorry you feel that I have been taken advantage of," Harry interjected coldly. "It's sad that you have so little faith in your daughter. After our discussion on Saturday, I was hoping we wouldn't have to have another argument about the second item you and Mr. Weasley agreed to."

Mrs. Weasley drew back like she'd been slapped. Mr. Weasley put a hand on her arm, but spoke to Harry in an even voice. "I don't see how Ginny's wand would be a security expense, Harry."

"How much of a response did your grandmother's wand give you, Ginny?"

Ginny wouldn't meet her mother's eyes. Instead she turned toward Harry and answered. "I got a couple of sparks out of it, once," she said softly.

Harry nodded at her, smiling to reassure her, then turned back toward her parents. "Using a wand that isn't attuned to her magic is possible, but it makes everything much more difficult. I don't want her going to a place like Hogwarts with any kind of handicap – it simply isn't safe."

Mrs. Weasley shook her head, "Harry, it isn't—"

Harry cut her off. "It isn't that dangerous? I didn't get my arm broken by a troll that was let into the castle? I didn't have to kill a professor that was possessed by Voldemort to keep him from stealing the key to immortality?" He ignored their flinch at the mention of the Dark Lord's name.

"But he's gone now, you said—"

"He's gone -- for now," Harry agreed, cutting her off. "But Draco Malfoy is still there, with most of the Slytherins dancing to his tune. I've lost track of the number of times they've started something or tried to hurt me or one of my friends last year. He even had some of his friends assault Neville and Hermione on the Hogwarts Express coming back from Christmas holidays. If the Dursleys hadn't destroyed the evidence, I'll bet we'd find out that Draco or Lucius sent me those doxies to try and get me expelled from Hogwarts."

Mrs. Weasley was looking even more upset. "But Professor Dumbledore said he has the situation under control."

"I imagine he thought the situation with the Dursleys was under control as well," Harry spat bitterly, making everyone flinch a little. Ginny's face went red and he patted her arm. "It's all right, but I don't

think Professor Dumbledore is really motivated to rein in the worst of the Slytherins. Maybe he's afraid they'll throw in completely with Voldemort if that happens." He shrugged and smiled at Ginny. "Anyone that wants to hurt her is going to have to get through me and her brothers," he said, ignoring the roughness in his voice. "But she's even safer if she has a decent wand and can defend herself. That's why we're teaching her martial arts as well. If you make her take the wand back, I'll just owl Ollivander and then give it to her again when we're in school."

Mrs. Weasley was speechless, but her face looked furious, both embarrassed and frustrated. Mr. Weasley squeezed her arm again. "You've given this a lot of thought," he observed quietly.

Harry nodded. "Ever since we made our agreement in St. Mungo's. I've also talked to my account manager at Gringotts about having a survey done of the wards here. They should be here after some time after the hearing is settled." He turned directly toward Mrs. Weasley and looked her square in the eyes. "If you and your husband agree to the guardianship, then that's going to paint a large target over this house and everyone in it. I shan't blame you in the slightest if you change your mind about this. It's been a wonderful break, staying here, and I'm sure whoever Dumbledore puts up to petitioning for my guardianship will be at least somewhat appropriate. If all of this, the security and everything else, is going to make you uncomfortable, now is the time to say something." Harry steeled himself. He'd pretty much told the woman off, threatened her family and way of life, and then finally asked if she still wanted to adopt him.

Mrs. Weasley responded by getting up from the table and folding him and Ginny into a bone-crushing hug. He stiffened for a moment, and then shyly returned it. The angle he was at, he ended up slipping one arm around Mrs. Weasley and the other around Ginny's waist.

"Well, since that's settled," Mr. Weasley said, "we should all try to get some sleep. We have an early meeting at the Ministry."

Harry was dressed smartly in his new clothes and plain black robe when they arrived at the Ministry. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were also wearing their formal robes. The other Weasleys had wanted to attend,



but Mr. Weasley felt it would be better if only he and his wife came to represent the family. Harry wondered about Draco's cracks about the number of children they had. Did other Wizarding families look down on them for having a large family?

They rode the phone booth down to the lobby. Harry tried not to think about the duel between Dumbledore and Voldemort that wrecked the place. When they checked in their wands, the Auror on duty stared unabashed at Harry's scar, irritating him.

When Mr. Weasley checked in at the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, they received some unwelcome news. There had been a formal challenge filed, and the hearing had been moved to courtroom ten.

Mr. Weasley frowned as they hurried back to the lifts. "This means that some members of the Wizengamot will be in attendance," he said. "They may have a trio serving as a judge's panel."

For his part, Harry tried to ignore the way his stomach began to turn at the mention of the new venue. He remembered being tried there for violations of the underage magic laws after a pair of dementors assaulted him and Dudley. It was also the first time he'd met that loathsome toad, Dolores Umbridge, who'd sent the dementors and even tried to torture him using the Cruciatus curse.

No, he didn't have a lot of good memories of this place.

As they hustled through the underground passages to the dungeons, Harry struggled to master his anxiety. His wand was a reassuring presence strapped to his arm, even though he couldn't use it to get out of this mess. When they stepped into the courtroom, the setup was a little different. The single chair was gone, and in its place were three tables with chairs behind them.

Behind the table farthest from the door sat a tall man with long pale blond hair. Harry clenched his teeth as he recognized Lucius Malfoy. With him were two more large men in equally fine clothing, and a thin blond woman he recognized as Draco's mother, Narcissa.

The middle table was occupied by ruddy faced man with a thin brown beard that Harry recognized as Amos Diggory. The woman next to him appeared to be Mrs. Diggory. Both of them were eying the Malfoys with some trepidation.

The nearest table had only one occupant and three empty chairs. The man, tall and stooped with a fringe of yellow hair looked up at them and grimaced. "Arthur, I'd hoped you'd get here a little earlier, they are about to begin." He nodded up at the benches opposite the tables.

Only three seats were occupied, but Harry recognized Amelia Bones as one of the three Wizengamot members in attendance.

As they hurried to their seats, the tall man spoke again. "Arthur, did you bring those financial statements?"

Mr. Weasley reluctantly pulled a sheaf of parchment from his robes. "I did, but I don't really see where this is necessary, William."

"Look Arthur, I'm the advocate here. I agreed to represent you as a favour, but you need to remember that this is what I do for a living. No matter what shape you are in, it always scores more points with the judge if you are up front about things. The fact that this has escalated to a triumvirate doesn't change that."

"But if those are entered as supporting documentation, won't that mean the others can use anything in there against our case?" Mr. Weasley asked. Harry knew they were a little sensitive about financial matters. Mr. Weasley didn't work for a particularly glamorous or well-funded department, since he was only really protecting Muggles.

William shrugged. "If they knew what to look for, maybe, but it's not normally done, and they won't have any notice. This is sure to score points with Amelia though." Harry narrowed his eyes. Something about the man made him distrustful.

Mr. Weasley reluctantly nodded and held out the documents. Harry grabbed his wrist. "Is your name William Bendricks?" he asked.

The stooped man looked confused. "Er, yes. Why?"

“That was quite a sum of galleons Lucius transferred to your vault on Friday, wasn’t it?” The blood draining from the man’s face gave Harry an inspiration. “I think you are about to have an acute attack of upset stomach. I think you are unfortunately going to have to miss this whole hearing, and end up having to give all that money back to your benefactor. That is, unless you want that information and everything else my contacts have gathered about you to be on the front page of the Daily Prophet. I guarantee my name will get you tons of publicity, all of it bad.”

Mr. Bendoricks shot to his feet, holding his stomach, and bolted from the room.

“I’d ignore any advice that louse gave you, Mr. Weasley. Lucius paid him off to sabotage your case.”

Mr. Weasley looked stunned. “Harry, how do you know that?”

Harry lowered his voice to a whisper. “The goblin that manages my accounts at Gringotts has been helping me with some things. Since right now my next of kin are all Muggles, he has a vested interest in my health and well-being.” While that was technically true, he’d actually gotten the crucial information about William Bendoricks directly from the man’s mind. Any qualms he had about using Legilimency vanished the moment he saw the man’s guilt.

“Arthur?”

“Hello Amos,” Mr. Weasley said, turning in his chair. “What are you doing here?”

Mr. Diggory looked back over his shoulder at the Malfoys. “Dumbledore sent me. Don’t worry, we have everything covered,” he said nodding at Harry. “You and Molly don’t have to worry about it.”

“That’s quite all right,” Mrs. Weasley said, patting Harry fondly on the shoulder. “We’re more than happy to look after him.” Harry felt a warm glow. He and Mrs. Weasley had been at odds lately, but she was still the closest thing he’d had to a mother in either of his lives.

“But, er... Dumbledore said... he doesn’t want you to...” Mr. Diggory struggled to find a delicate way to say what he was thinking. He was spared this task by Madam Bones clearing her throat.

“If everyone is present, we’d like to begin this hearing to determine guardianship for one Harry James Potter.” She looked down at something and then up again at the tables, her monocle glinting. “Mr. Weasley, where is Mr. Bendoricks?”

“He’s, er, not feeling very well. We can go on without him though.”

Madam Bones nodded. “If that is acceptable to you then we will do so. The court has been presented with three petitions for guardianship. The court recognizes Mr. Malfoy, Mr. Diggory, and Mr. Weasley as the applicants. Have any of these parties a desire to withdraw their application?”

She looked up and waited but no one responded, though Mr. Diggory did give the Weasleys a long look.

“Very well, we will hear from the claimants in reverse order of their date of application. Mr. Malfoy?”

Lucius rose to his feet with practiced grace. “Thank you, Madam Bones,” Lucius said with a patrician tone. “It has come to my attention that an icon of the Wizarding world has been treated in a less than helpful manner by those who were supposed to have his best interests at heart. After removing a threat that had slain or enslaved so many of us, the boy, little more than an infant, was sent to live with -- Muggles. These creatures did not treat him in any way appropriate to his station. He was kept completely ignorant of his heritage, until the headmaster of Hogwarts was forced to send his brute of a groundskeeper after them, to forcibly extract the boy from his captors. He returned to our world woefully ignorant of our ways and customs, and lashed out at many who sought to offer him friendship. He has fallen in with bad company, who only seek to use him for his wealth and fame. My son has made me aware of this travesty of justice and I found myself moved once I knew the facts of the situation. I would take the boy into my home as a proper fosterling and allow him the opportunity to learn the ways of our culture. He shall have the finest tutors and abundant opportunities to better himself and truly find his

place in our world. As Malfoys, we obviously have more than enough wealth to sustain ourselves, and pledge that all of his inheritance shall remain untouched until he comes of age, something I don't think others are willing to do." At the end he sent a sardonic glare at the Weasleys. Harry found himself impressed by the skill of the man's delivery. The pledge regarding Harry's inheritance was a nice touch, though it sent a chill down his spine. If they weren't in this for the money, then they were obviously just after him.

Madam Bones and the other two judges, both older wizards, questioned Lucius about some of the details of his proposal. As they finished, Harry realized why Bendoricks had been so adamant that Mr. Weasley enter those financial statements. Those could be used to support Malfoy's claims that the Weasleys were only doing this to get at Harry's money.

Amos Diggory's speech was a little less polished. "Er, Madam Bones, the missus and I became aware of the situation with poor Harry through some friends at his school. My son Cedric attends Hogwarts as well. He's a good boy, and could serve as a fine older brother for Harry. We have a very secure mansion near Ottery St. Catchpole with plenty of room, and Harry could visit with his friends from school when he's on holiday. Due to my work with the Ministry, we have all the latest wards and protective enchantments. He, uh, also wouldn't have a lot of competition for our attention or guidance. Like I said, we have plenty of space and we'd love to have him stay with us." He cleared his throat, ducked his head, and sat down abruptly.

Harry looked back and forth from Mr. to Mrs. Weasley. Mr. Weasley was quickly writing something down on a scrap of parchment. Harry realized with horror that he didn't have anything prepared, as William Bendoricks was obviously the one who was supposed to have been speaking.

"Will I get a chance to speak to the court, Mr. Weasley?" Harry whispered while Mrs. Bones was questioning Amos Diggory about Harry and Cedric's nonexistent relationship.

“That’s not normally done, Harry,” Mr. Weasley whispered back. “Just give me a moment, and I can improvise something... didn’t expect William to-”

“If you don’t mind, I’ve given this some thought, and I would like a chance to speak to the judges,” Harry replied.

“Are you sure about this, Harry?” Arthur asked.

Harry nodded and Mr. Weasley slumped in his chair. “Good luck then, my boy.”

“Who will address the court on behalf of the Weasley claim?” Madam Bones asked.

“I will,” Harry said, standing up.

“Madam Justice, I must object,” Lucius called out. “This is not proper procedure for such a hearing.” His eyes glinted dangerously and Harry knew he was cursing Bendoricks’ absence.

“Young man, Mr. Malfoy is correct, and it is not standard procedure for you to directly address the court.”

“Yes Ma’am, I do understand that. However, Mr. Weasley has granted me the right as his advocate.”

“Madam Justice, this boy is obviously deficient in his understanding our laws and traditions,” Lucius said, his temper finally beginning to show.

“Oddly enough, Mr. Malfoy, there is no regulation disallowing the subject of a claim of guardianship from speaking on behalf of one of the claimants. You may proceed, Mr. Potter.” Harry thought he detected a faint smile on her lips.

“Thank you, Madam Justice. I did find it somewhat interesting that I would not normally be allowed to speak. Muggle courts are much different when conducting a custody hearing. Perhaps that is because they are more concerned for the child’s welfare than his wealth,

prestige or inheritance.” That last jab raised some eyebrows on the bench and set the Malfoys to muttering at one another.

“But I digress,” Harry continued. “It was true that I was raised to be ignorant of my heritage. Thus it was to my great good fortune that some of the first people I met when I rejoined the Wizarding world were Weasleys. At first, no one recognized who I was. A kindly family showed me how to get onto platform nine and three quarters. As we talked about starting at Hogwarts, I got into a discussion about household magic with their youngest. We agreed to write each other and she gave me a thorough grounding of how to operate in a Wizarding home. The brothers helped me get my trunk on board the Hogwarts express, and their youngest son sat with me on the train before any of them recognized me. That youngest son, Ron, was sorted with me into Gryffindor, and two months later saved my life and the life of another student when a troll broke into the castle.” Harry took a deep breath while a low murmur broke out in the courtroom.

“It should also be pointed out that we wouldn’t have been in harm’s way if it were not for the actions of Mr. Malfoy’s son, Draco.” If looks could kill, Harry might have died on the spot. He smiled thinly back at them.

“Some of my first Christmas presents were from Mrs. Weasley, who found out my Muggle relatives did not include me in their celebrations. At the end of the year, I made a rather foolhardy manoeuvre during the Quidditch finals and was only spared a broken neck, or worse, by the quick thinking of Ron’s older brothers, Fred and George, who’d made a special point of looking out for me.”

Harry took a deep breath to steady himself. “As you are no doubt aware, things deteriorated rapidly with my Muggle relatives when I returned to their house. This culminated in my receiving injuries that would likely have ended my life. My friends in the Weasley family, worried because they hadn’t heard from me in a while, mounted a rescue operation at great personal risk to themselves. It is not exaggeration to say that they literally saved my life that day. Most of my best friends are Weasleys, and I’m rather fond of the lot of them.”

He turned and smiled at Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, and wasn't surprised to see that she'd teared up a bit.

"As Mr. Malfoy so crassly brought up the subject of money, I will address it. The only real arguments I have had with the Weasleys have revolved around that subject. I had to make it a condition of my coming to stay with them that they let me chip in a little for the grocery bill. They didn't really want to let me do it, but the last of the Potters isn't going to be a freeloader. Again, I will point out that they befriended me before they realized who I was. I have no doubt of their intentions and there is no place that I would rather live than with the first people to show me what a proper family was like. I'm sure the Diggorys are nice people, but I don't really know them and don't know if I've ever met their son. I hope that I have been able to address any concerns in the minds of the court and that my desires in this matter will be given proper weight."

Madam Bones looked at Harry for a long moment as the other judges whispered to each other. Finally she nodded. "Mr. Potter, you mentioned some conditions you agreed to with the Weasleys?"

"Yes, Madam Justice. The first regarded the room and board, though I suspect Mrs. Weasley purposefully underestimates how much I eat, therefore I will likely be accompanying her to the grocers at some point in the future." He turned and smiled at her to take the sting out of his words. "The second was with regards to my shouldering the expenses for any additional security needs, and I am coordinating that with the manager of my inheritance as soon as things are settled. Well, if they are settled, I suppose."

"Is there a particular reason you are concerned about security?" She asked. Her eyes darted towards the Diggorys. "Is the Weasley residence a hazardous place to live?"

"Oh no," Harry disagreed. "I just felt it prudent to make sure everything was covered. You see the incident at the Dursley household was precipitated by someone sending me a package on my birthday that contained a quartet of doxies." With that he slid up the right sleeve of his robes, revealing the large scar on his forearm. "As you can see, I did not escape unscathed."



Madam Bones' lips compressed as she frowned. "Do you know who sent those to you?" she asked.

"I don't know for sure, Madam Justice," Harry replied, then turned toward the Malfoys. "Though I can think of some who'd wish me injured or wrongly punished for under-age magic use," he spat venomously.

Harry knew better than to actively probe someone who was likely a master Occlumens. But he locked eyes with the Malfoy patriarch as he spoke, and the flash of rage and frustration he let slip out was all the confirmation Harry needed.

"Very well," Madam Bones said, "The court will observe a short recess while we come to a decision."

Harry sat down with a sigh. Mrs. Weasley took his hand, but didn't say anything. Harry squeezed her fingers, but he was too nervous to sit still. He tried to think of anything else he could have brought up to convince the judges, or if he'd said too much. He glanced over at the Diggorys, who did not look very happy. Leaning toward Mr. Weasley, he whispered "If they are here on Dumbledore's behalf, why isn't he in here with them?"

"Madam Bones did a little investigating on how you came to live with the Dursleys in the first place, and I think she's a little put out with him right now. I, er, also had a few words with her after you were brought to Saint Mungo's. I wanted to make sure there was no way you'd be put back there. Anyway, when she took charge of the panel, I imagine Professor Dumbledore decided that his presence would hurt their claim more than it would help."

Harry nodded slowly, revising his opinion of his hopefully soon-to-be foster father. Just because the man didn't play the political one-upmanship games in the Ministry didn't mean he was unaware of them.

They sat a while longer, each lost in their thoughts and too intimidated by the forbidding courtroom to break the silence again. Harry jumped when the door at the back of the high benches swung open and the three judges filed in again.

After they settled themselves, Madam Bones spoke. "Each claimant to the position of guardianship to Harry James Potter has given valid reasons why their claim should be recognized. Each proposal weighed in with different arguments, different guarantees. It is with no small difficulty that we were able to come to a decision."

Harry found himself grinding his teeth. *If they give me to the Malfoys I'll just have to Avada Kedavra them on the spot and tell Madam Bones to pick again.*

"After all due consideration," Madam Bones continued, unaware of the potential bloodbath about to erupt, "it is the decision of this court to grant the initial claim, filed by Arthur Weasley."

Harry leaned back in his chair and let out the breath he'd been holding. Mrs. Weasley squeezed his hand so hard he thought it might break. He felt Mr. Weasley's hand on his shoulder and managed to relax this time.

He turned and watched the Malfoys exit the courtroom at a quick walk, their fury quite evident on their faces. The Diggorys stood up a little slower, and walked over to their table.

"Well Arthur, no hard feelings. The important thing was to keep him out of *their* hands," he said, nodding after the Malfoys.

"No Amos," Arthur said affably. "I understand you were *just following orders*." His emphasis on the last words did not go unnoticed.

"Are you sure you know what you're doing?" the ruddy-faced wizard asked, honest concern drawing across his features.

"Yes, I think we do," he said, and gave Harry's shoulder a squeeze. Harry felt that if someone asked, he could produce a Patronus that would clear Azkaban single-handedly.

When they exited the courtroom, Harry saw a familiar figure talking with the Diggorys. "Mr. Weasley," he asked quietly, "do you mind if I talk to Professor Dumbledore for a moment? I have something I need to ask him."

The Weasleys looked at each other. "Certainly, Harry. We may not always agree with him, but I'm not going to start avoiding him."

As they walked up, the Diggorys stopped talking. Harry stared back into the headmaster's twinkling blue eyes, almost daring him to try and read his mind. Better him than the Weasleys who had no defences. But the old man did not take the bait and simply greeted them. "Harry, I suppose I must congratulate you on getting your way, but are you sure this is for the best?"

Harry took a moment to answer as he ruthlessly suppressed his first three responses. "Yes, sir, I am sure that this is for the best."

"Then I hope time will prove you right, and that others do not pay the price."

Harry refused to give the man the satisfaction of wincing. "Speaking of paying the price, why is Sirius Black still in Azkaban?" Harry heard Mrs. Weasley gasp.

Only the slight pause before the headmaster responded gave hint to his surprise. "I see you've been doing some research," the old man said carefully.

"It wasn't that hard. My parents only had one friend named Peter, Peter Pettigrew. If he was the secret keeper then Black obviously was not. I gave you that information almost two months ago. My parents' friend was put away without even a trial. At the very least my information should merit a hearing, or an interrogation with Veritaserum."

Albus Dumbledore, Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, let out a sigh. "It is because he was put away without a trial that makes things difficult, Harry. The Ministry is very reluctant to consider your testimony, based on memories that old. More likely it is because Sirius Black may be innocent. Many of those in power then are still here today, and discovering that they put an innocent man in Azkaban without a trial would create a terrible scandal."

"And so they want to let him rot in there? That is unacceptable!" Harry knew his anger was in part because he hadn't really found a better

way to push this issue earlier. The fact that even after he'd found a way, they were still resisting... that was almost enough to put him over the edge. Sometimes he wanted to grab the headmaster and scream in his face 'You're doing it all wrong! Everyone is going to die at this rate!'

"Harry, there is still the issue of the Muggles that died in the explosion," Professor Dumbledore reminded him.

"The only reason people thought he did that was because he was supposed to be Voldemort's spy. Besides, if they were wrong about who betrayed my parents, they could very well be wrong about everything. Could you see one of my father's best friends committing mass murder?"

"I wouldn't have thought any of them capable of betraying you and your parents to Voldemort, yet we know it was done," Dumbledore answered dryly.

Harry blinked rapidly and sighed. "He still deserves the benefit of the doubt. He never even got a trial -- and if you won't do something about it then I will!" He knew his voice was getting louder and drawing some stares. He didn't really care, either. Everyone was so concerned about maintaining appearances that they would let an innocent man be tortured by dementors. Still, he subsided a bit when he felt hands on his shoulders. He wouldn't take this out on the Weasleys.

The man in front of him however was another matter. Especially when he said something like "Harry, I want you to promise you won't do anything rash."

"Oh, you mean like trust you?" Harry asked scornfully. A nasty corner of his soul was happy to see the twinkles disappear entirely from his eyes. "Did Sirius trust you to make sure he got a fair trial? Professor, almost every bit of misery in my life since I got this scar came directly or indirectly from you. You have no right to ask anything of me."

Harry realized he'd maybe gone a little too far when he turned to go and saw the look on the Weasleys' faces. The Diggorys looked absolutely gobsmacked.

As Mr. and Mrs. Weasley led him back to the lifts, Harry spoke in a voice little more than a whisper. "I'm sorry you had to see that," he said sincerely.

Mr. Weasley glanced down at him. "I am going to want an explanation when we get home."

Harry nodded. "You more than deserve one. I'd also like to ask your help... I need to go to Azkaban."

A/N

Alrighty then. A bit longer delay on this one, but the words were really flowing like concrete. At least it's a nice big chapter (I believe the largest to date) and we've seen at least some progress on the Rita, Sirius, Doxy, and Dumbledore fronts.

Scabbers' time will come.

Comments:

AWMPerry – Thanks for the tip on British banking. Switched the names as soon as I saw it!

Fangalla Marie – Oddly enough, according to my Brit-slang sites, an eppy is slang for 'a fit', as in short for 'epileptic fit'. Sorry if this update wasn't soon enough. You can keep Tallulah though.

Simxp – Ginny can know the hex (see this chapter for the source) without casting it. Also, as suggested in book 6, Magical residences may not even be monitored, as it is assumed that wizarding parents can control their offspring.

Dumbledore is not ignorant of Snape's use of legilimency. He sort of hinted to Harry on Christmas Eve that they sometimes have to do things for the safety of the students... and given that Snape is in charge of the Slytherins, it's probably quite handy for ferreting out their little plots. Yes, death and knowing he'd ultimately failed gave the Dumbledore portrait in the future a massive dose of humility. The current Dumbledore knows that there are things going on that he

doesn't understand, many of them tied to Harry. But he still thinks he knows what's best for everyone.

Harry's mental age would be a bit tricky to calculate right now. Future Harry was nearly thirty, but he spent the last thirteen years constantly fighting, so his development was pretty much arrested at seventeen. Now he's mixed and merged with his eleven year old self. And he's living in a (now) twelve year old body and socializing with pre-teens and now he's being treated as a younger son in a real family. Harry comes by his turmoil honestly, folks.

Note: The legal terminology used throughout these chapters was guardianship, not adoption. Harry is not changing his last name. (Old Wizarding families would definitely not approve of such a tradition that obliterated family names.) While Fred and George may joke about it (given their respect for Harry's pranking skills), but he's not legally going to be their brother.

One final note: I know how to add the horizontal lines in the document manager. But I do all my writing in MS Word. I've tried adding the html code to the manuscript where I want the line, but the upload process strips the less-than and greater-than signs off the html tag and wreck it. Does anyone have any brilliant ideas? I'd like to do everything in my word docs so I can upload corrections with minimal fuss....

Thanks for reading!

-Matthew

## Chapter 16

Mrs. Weasley floored back to The Burrow while Harry and Mr. Weasley returned to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement to fill out the approximately three stone of paperwork needed to formalize the guardianship. While they worked, Harry explained what he knew about the Fidelius charm that was supposed to protect the Potter home in Godric's Hollow. By the time Harry signed the last form in triplicate, it was well past lunch time. As they turned everything in, Mr. Weasley also inquired about the visitor schedule for Azkaban Wizarding prison.

It turned out there weren't visiting hours, per se. The crimes committed by most of the inmates were such that few people were inclined to visit them. However, through prior arrangement with the warden, interviews with prisoners could be arranged. As one of the supposed victims of Sirius Black's betrayal, Harry had more than sufficient grounds to request a visit. Mr. Weasley sent a message to the Warden requesting a meeting at their earliest convenience. He'd been shocked and dismayed at the implications of what Harry had told him.

By the time they were ready to leave the Ministry, Harry's stomach was growling audibly, bringing a rueful grin to Mr. Weasley's lips. "Best get you home, Harry, or Molly will have my head for starving you."

When Harry followed Mr. Weasley out of the fireplace at The Burrow, his ears were assaulted by an avalanche of noise.

"We got Potter! We got Potter!" The twins were doing a re-enactment of their jig from the sorting feast of last fall. This time Ron and Ginny had linked arms and joined in as well. Percy was making a face at all the racket. Mrs. Weasley looked torn between wanting to shush them and wanting to join in as well.

Harry felt like he'd just won another Quidditch Cup when the dancing broke up and he was suddenly engulfed in a Weasley group hug. He hadn't realized how worried his friends had been about the hearing, but now he saw Ginny's eyes were quite red and Ron looked a little

choked up as well. For once, the twins weren't taking the mickey out of them about it either.

Harry didn't really remember what Mrs. Weasley fixed for lunch that day. He vaguely remembered her kicking them out of the kitchen when he and Ginny went to clear the table. He ended up dragging her out with them to the paddock when her brothers suggested Quidditch.

She sat at the foot of an apple tree, watching them play two on two Quidditch. After the twins got him and Ron down by quite a few goals, Harry landed next to Ginny, rolling his shoulder theatrically and grimacing.

"I think I popped something. Want to have a go?" he asked her in a loud voice, holding out the Nimbus 2000.

Ginny stared at the broom like it was a snake about to bite her.

Ignoring Ron's protests, Harry took another step closer and lowered his voice. "Here's a chance to show them you aren't really 'ickle Gin-Gin'..." He wondered if his smile could get any wider without splitting his lips.

"Harry, she's going to wreck your broom! Mum is going to kill you if-" Ron's words were cut off as Ginny rocketed into the air, making him flinch back and almost lose control of the rickety Cleansweep Four he was riding.

Ginny cut into a tight loop and shot between the twins, grabbing the Quaffle they were idly tossing back and forth. She didn't decelerate before the ball was through their goal. Taking in the dumbfounded looks on her brothers' faces, she made an exasperated sound. "What's the matter? Haven't you ever seen a girl on a broom before?"

"Better answer that one carefully," Harry called out from the ground. "Angelina would probably be highly interested in your answer. After she removed the Quaffle from your nose."

Ginny let out a laugh and the game resumed. Harry stretched out on the warm grass and enjoyed the show. Ginny's agility and speed on Harry's broomstick was just about unstoppable. Before long, Ron



simply fell back and concentrated on guarding the younger siblings' goal, while his sister quite literally flew rings around the twins. By early evening, Fred and George had been gleefully trounced in three straight sets. Harry couldn't ever remember enjoying just *watching* Quidditch quite so much.

When Ginny and her brothers came in for a landing, she frowned at Harry. "Sorry, I hogged your broom all afternoon," she whispered guiltily as they walked back to The Burrow. "I sort of lost track of how long we'd been up there."

"Don't be sorry," Harry replied with a grin. "I'd rather watch you play than try being a chaser myself. I'm rubbish at passing."

She gave him a long look as they neared the back door. "Thanks Harry," she said with a shy smile of her own.

After dinner, the five of them retired to the sitting room to work on their Occlumency. Mrs. Weasley had wondered what they were up to at first, but was satisfied with their assurances that it was for school, and it wouldn't violate the underage magic laws, since no wands were involved. If she was really concerned, Harry was prepared to let her know why they were studying Occlumency. He almost anticipated the fit she'd throw when she found out what Professor Snape had been doing to her children.

That night, Harry was pleasantly surprised to get almost nine hours of sleep. He awoke feeling almost hyperactive from being completely rested.

Thursday they settled back into their routine of martial arts alternated with Occlumency. Harry noticed a slight decrease in the random emotional emissions from the twins. It seemed the meditation exercises were starting to help them not broadcast their feelings quite so loudly. Ginny and Ron didn't show any noticeable differences, which set Harry to thinking.

In all his reading, there was no mention of teaching Occlumency to students as young as eleven or twelve. It might be impossible for children that young to learn to defend their minds from intrusion. It was also possible that children were naturally more open, and might

just take longer. These complications didn't really alter Harry's plans. It did, however, make him realize that it would likely take longer than he thought to come clean with his friends.

During a break after lunch, Harry wrote a note and gave it to Hedwig to deliver. It was short and to the point. He offered both a carrot and a stick to the message's recipient, along with instructions on how to get the former and not the latter. Harry knew he was potentially playing with fire here, but he hoped his assessment of the personality in question was accurate.

When Mr. Weasley came home that evening, he told Harry that he'd gotten a reply from Azkaban, and the two of them would be allowed to visit the facility Friday morning at ten a.m. Mrs. Weasley gave Harry a worried look, but didn't say anything.

After his confrontation with Dumbledore, Harry explained to his guardians about his dreams and the implications of Sirius Black's innocence. While she was horrified at the thought of an innocent person being sentenced to life at the Wizarding prison, Mrs. Weasley was less than happy with the idea of Harry going there, even for a visit. It took some fast talking for Harry to reassure her. He'd also had to resort to bringing up details. He really hoped no one asked where he got some of that information. While it was no secret that Sirius was Harry's godfather, he couldn't point to a single person as being the one who told him. Thus far, he'd mostly skated on this issue – when he brought something up, his audience usually just assumed someone else spilled the beans. Fortunately, people like Dumbledore were more concerned with *what* Harry knew (and *how* to prevent him from finding out more); they seldom got around to asking how Harry knew what he did. On the other hand, he couldn't count on that blind spot in the Headmaster's thinking lasting forever. Professor Dumbledore wasn't a stupid man. Harry may not have agreed with how the head of the Order of the Phoenix conducted the war against Voldemort, but he also recognized the staggering depths of the man's knowledge.

Harry decided to go to bed a little early. Ron followed him upstairs and asked him if he was all right.

"Sure Ron," he replied, a little confused. "Why do you ask?"

"Well," Ron looked away, "you've been awfully quiet since dinner."

"Just a lot to think about; I wonder what my godfather is going to be like. He's been in Azkaban a terribly long time. I have no idea what to expect when I see him."

Ron nodded slowly. "That's got to be a lot to take in. You don't have to deal with it all yourself though."

Harry nodded, though he realized with some sadness that the worst of his issues he couldn't share with anyone yet. "Ron, when did you get so sensitive?"

Predictably, his friend's ears darkened. "Sod off, Harry," he muttered.

"Actually, I wasn't being sarcastic --for once. I bet Hermione will be impressed." Harry couldn't resist that last bit, wondering how far back that whole thing got started. The slightly panicked look on Ron's face lasted less than a second, but that was more than enough to give Harry a healthy surprise. *Damn, I had no bloody idea it was going on this long... or did I jump-start it a bit this time around?*

"You're bleedin' hilarious, Harry," Ron replied coolly. "Anyway, if you want to talk about something besides trying to embarrass me, you know where I am."

Harry sighed. "I do appreciate that Ron. I mean, you're as good a friend as a bloke could ask for, you know that, right?"

Ron nodded silently and they both began getting ready for bed. Harry knew he'd need his wits about him when he went to meet Sirius, so after completing his Occlumency exercises, he tried to focus his mind on happier memories.

He awoke the following morning before seven. He hadn't had a nightmare about Sirius falling through the Veil in a long time. It made him nostalgic, in a sick sort of way. Of course, he'd been having that one since before he turned sixteen, so he supposed he'd worn off a

lot of the sharp edges. Ginny throwing a wobbly at him for blaming himself needlessly hadn't hurt.

Harry was starting to prepare breakfast when Mrs. Weasley came down the stairs. Her lips pursed in annoyance at seeing Harry running her stove, but then she frowned.

"Odd to wake up and find someone else cooking breakfast," she said calmly. "Hasn't happened to me since I lived at home with my parents. Of course, Arthur pitches in when I'm sick, or when I'm in my last month, but the poor dear is a bit hopeless in the kitchen."

Harry made a face. "Sorry if I intruded. I just thought I'd go ahead and get things started."

"That's all right dear," she smiled, but it didn't quite reach her eyes. "Ron mentioned once that you have trouble sleeping at times." She paused and looked at him closely. "Nightmares?"

Harry sighed and nodded. "Once I'm up, I'm up. I figure if I'm already awake, I might as well help with breakfast. It's kind of calming, really."

"I know, that's why I enjoy it," Molly said with a small smile. "You know Arthur and I are here any time you want to talk."

"I appreciate that, Mrs. Weasley."

She smiled a little. "You know, you don't have to be so formal. Fosterlings usually call their guardians by their given names. I've discussed it with my husband, and we'd prefer if you called us Molly and Arthur."

"I'll try to do that, Mrs., er, Molly."

"Good," she said briskly. "Now, if you want, I can show you a few tricks that can make cooking on this old dear a bit less of a chore."

Harry shifted slightly to the side so Molly could join him at the stove. "I'd like that," he said with a shy smile.

By the time Ron and Ginny followed their father down the stairs, there was a meal of truly epic proportions waiting for them. Harry couldn't help but be impressed by what he'd already learned that morning. He recalled that Mrs. Weasley had home-schooled all her children before they attended Hogwarts, and done a cracking good job of it from what he could tell. She was an obviously gifted teacher.

Mr. Weasley had to go to the Ministry to check on a few things before he was to come back and collect Harry for the trip to Azkaban. Harry, Ron, and Ginny took a quick run while the Twins were just beginning to stir. Harry was obviously preoccupied, and after Ron knocked him down for the third time, Ginny offered to take his place sparring with her brother.

Harry shook his head ruefully and stepped back. She was right; the thought of seeing Sirius again was crowding out his other thoughts. Ron made the rather significant error of patronizing his little sister as they sparred. He was larger, had more reach, and had been practicing months longer. That, however, did not stop her from ducking under his arm and landing a quick punch at his unprotected stomach. It was surely an accident that her punch landed, well, lower than she probably intended.

After Ron was able to stand again, he took Ginny a bit more seriously. Harry watched and helped them catch when their stances got sloppy or their technique faltered. He tried not to think about Ginny's last fight, during the Hogwarts Massacre. Unbidden, the images of her broken and battered body flooded his mind and he had to turn away from his friends. He began practicing kicks and punches at random, snapping his blows as fast and as hard as he could. He battered imaginary enemies, trying to drain away his own emotions. Finally, he called a halt and led them on another run to cool down. Normally, he ran last in line, so he could keep an eye on his friends. This time he led, not wanting to see them, not wanting them to see his face. He set a fairly brutal pace, and by the time they returned to The Burrow, his heart stopped pounding and the sweat pouring down his face disguised his tears.

After he showered and dressed, Harry felt cleansed, almost as if he'd been hollowed out and allowed to drain. It was almost pleasant, that sense of detachment.

At half past nine, Arthur Floored back from the Ministry. Harry was sitting at the scrubbed wood table in the kitchen, and stood up as the tall red-headed man stepped out of the fireplace. "Ah, all ready, Harry?"

Harry nodded. "Thanks, Mr. W- er, Arthur."

"Ah, good. Molly said she'd talk to you about that. It'll probably be easiest to just Apparate to the docks. I've been there a couple of times, so I can take you along." He stood close to Harry and gripped his shoulders tightly. "Ready?" he asked.

Harry nodded and then felt a jerking motion as his vision went blurry. He blinked and saw a battered dock set into a rocky shoreline. The sharp tang of the sea burned in his nostrils. Arthur released him once it was clear he could stand. They walked across the damp stones to a small shack. As they drew closer the view in front of them suddenly wavered and changed.

The shack was now a concrete blockhouse, looking very sturdy with narrow slits for windows. Next to the entrance stood two alert looking wizards that Harry assumed were Aurors. Their wands were out and pointed at them. Harry clasped his hands together nervously. This also brought his fingers in contact with the butt of his wand. If they started casting, Harry was braced to knock Mr. Weasley down as he drew and returned fire...

Harry took a deep breath. His reflexes could get them into a lot of trouble here.

"Arthur Weasley," his guardian announced calmly, "escorting Harry Potter for a prisoner visit." The Aurors immediately lowered their wands and Harry relaxed.

Mr. Weasley must have been able to sense his tension. As they approached he spoke in a low tone. "Security is very tight here, which is quite understandable. Everything should be fine though. I don't

fancy being an Auror having to explain how he accidentally stunned Harry Potter.”

Harry snorted, but the man’s words did make him relax a bit. As they walked out onto the concrete dock that replaced the rickety wooden one, Harry could see a ferry boat moored at the end of it.

A weathered looking man with long grey hair let them into the cabin, which was scarcely warmer than the outside. *At least it’s out of the wind*, Harry reflected as he shivered a bit under his plain black robe. *It sure as hell doesn’t feel like August out here.*

In truth, Harry didn’t know if the weather was unusual. He’d never visited Azkaban before. It was said to be destroyed shortly after the Hogwarts Massacre. At that point the news reporting was starting to break down. Evidently Voldemort decided to liberate the few Death Eaters incarcerated there and eliminate the place as a symbol of justice and Ministry power. As the Dark Lord massed his forces, the Azkaban garrison nearly deserted. Instead, Alastor “Mad Eye” Moody, the legendary retired Auror showed up at the dock after disabling the Death Eater sentries. No one survived to tell the world what he said to the frightened guards, but it is known that they held the fortress against Voldemort’s forces for twenty-two days. In the end, the Dark Lord’s forces won, but gained nothing for it. Every structure on the island had been levelled in the fierce fighting, and rumour had it that Moody himself executed all of Voldemort’s men before he could free them. After that it was said that one way a prisoner of the Death Eaters could earn a swift death instead of lingering torture was to yell “Constant Vigilance!” at their captors.

Brooding about the future at least kept Harry too distracted to get sea-sick. They docked at a concrete quay identical to the one they’d just left. A path led from the foot of the docks to an enormous metal door set in the base of a cliff. A small slit opened and Arthur had to identify them again. Harry was increasingly distracted by the chill in the air. He also felt an unpleasantly familiar stirring in the back of his mind. *The Dementors can’t be affecting me all the way out here... can they?* He stiffened his Occlumency shields as much as he could, but it didn’t seem to help.

The massive door retracted into a slot cut in the stone and they entered a rough-hewn tunnel bored out of solid rock. Torches set in wrought iron sconces every dozen paces provided minimal light. Harry followed numbly, trying not to hear the cloying whispers lingering just below the threshold of comprehension. Sirius described escaping through bars, so the prisoners were probably kept in above-ground cells. Perhaps these underground passages shielded him from the worst of the dementors' powers. He shuddered to think of what it must be like in the prison itself. They passed stout wooden doors, bound with iron strips, set flush against the walls. Eventually, their guide stopped in front of one and opened it.

Harry stepped into a better-lit room. This one was easily thirty feet on a side, though the low ceiling made it appear smaller. Stationed in each corner was an Auror, their impassive faces showing nothing.

In the centre of the room was a large wooden table. On the near side was a pair of empty chairs. On the far side was a single chair, occupied.

Sirius Black sat rigidly, his wrists bound in manacles connected to chains that wound through the reinforced frame of his chair. He was just as gaunt and corpse-like as Harry remembered from the Shrieking Shack. Long filthy matted hair hung down to the arms of his chair and glittering dark grey eyes glared emotionlessly ahead.

When the door closed behind them, those bottomless eyes flickered toward the intruders. Harry met his gaze evenly and saw those eyes widen a tiny bit. Harry reached out gently with his Legilimency, but Sirius was so tightly contained that he might as well have been a porcelain statue as a man.

His eyes, however, bored relentlessly into Harry's. Arthur carefully led him to the table, and he sat down without breaking eye contact.

When Sirius spoke, his voice was so gravelly from disuse that his words were almost indecipherable. "You look just like your father did at your age... except..." he swallowed.

"Except for the eyes, I know," Harry said softly.



Sirius nodded slowly. If his skin were less sallow, Harry imagined it would have gone pale.

"I, er, I remember that night-bits and pieces of it anyway. I know Peter was the secret-keeper, not you." Harry's words tumbled out of his mouth. The look on his Godfather's face was more than he could bear. The two statements he made were, technically, both true.

Sirius' eyebrows rose until they were obscured under his matted hair. "You... know? What happened?"

Harry nodded. "Most of it; I've been working on Dumbledore, trying to get you freed. The ministry is being difficult though. Part of it is those Muggles who were killed when you confronted Peter. Did they ever check your wand to see if you did that spell?"

Sirius shook his head. "It would be hard to do that since they snapped it moments after I was taken into custody."

Harry snarled. "Idiots," he muttered. This was going to make it even harder to prove his innocence; they had no business punishing him before he was even tried.

Sirius blinked. "You sound a lot more like your mother," he whispered.

"Did she ever express a desire to hex the entire Ministry?" Harry growled. He glanced over at Arthur, who seemed to be a little amused. "Sorry," he muttered.

"Quite all right, Harry, sometimes I feel like hexing them myself," Arthur agreed affably.

Harry noticed Sirius studying Arthur curiously. "This is Arthur Weasley," he said. "He and his wife agreed to be my guardians. Their youngest children go to Hogwarts with me, but we're all living at The Burrow. It's out near Ottery St. Catchpole in Devon."

Sirius looked at him, confused. Privately, Harry preferred any expression over that deadened look he'd had when they entered the room. "I was staying with my Aunt Petunia and her family, but that

didn't, well, it wasn't working out." He didn't want to tell Sirius too much and just add to his godfather's burdens. Honestly, he was also a little afraid of the man's reaction. He didn't want this interview to end prematurely.

"I've seen you before, at a... meeting," Sirius whispered. He seemed to be studying Arthur's face. When Harry glanced at his guardian he was surprised to see how angry the man was. He wondered for a moment if he was angry at Sirius, but when Arthur simply nodded Harry made the connection to his downplaying of the situation at the Dursleys. *Damn*, Harry thought in wonder, *Arthur never gets mad like that*. It gave him a warm glow, even as he felt a little twinge of fear. *I don't want him getting hurt trying to protect me*.

"Harry's a good boy. My son couldn't stop talking about him when he returned from Hogwarts. Molly and I will take good care of him." Arthur spoke calmly but firmly. Something seemed to pass between the two men and Sirius relaxed visibly.

Harry wasn't quite sure what to make of all that. "I've told Professor Dumbledore," he said suddenly. "He said he's been trying to get you out of here, but the people in the Ministry don't want to listen. I gave him a bit of an earful when I heard that," Harry admitted ruefully. Arthur actually chuckled out loud. "I'm not happy with you being stuck in here," he continued, "and I'm going to make things quite difficult for people."

Sirius blinked and looked at Arthur.

"Yes, he talks like that quite often. He rather reminds me of Professor McGonagall when she gets angry. If there is anything we can do to help him, rest assured we will do so."

Sirius swallowed. Harry caught his eyes and they bored into his again. This time he could dimly feel a morass of thickly clotted emotions swirling from his godfather. He hoped that giving the man hope wouldn't prove to be cruel. "I, er, I think it would probably help if we could find Peter. If he's still alive, capturing him would wreck the Ministry's case wouldn't it?"

"If he's still alive," Sirius said slowly. His struggle not to give in to hope was as obvious as it was heart-rending.

Harry nodded thoughtfully. "If you, well, can you tell us how he got away when everyone thought you'd killed him?"

Sirius took a deep breath. The man's skin was stretched tight over his bones. Harry hated himself for not finding a way to get here even quicker. *If Dumbledore had been a little more...* Harry let the thought trail off. There really wasn't another way that could have worked, aside from going public. And if that failed, the Sirius would likely be stuck in here forever.

"I suppose it doesn't really matter anyway. Peter was an unregistered Animagus. He took the form of a rat, appropriately enough. I was in a hurry when I found him... as far as Dumbledore knew, I was the secret keeper for Lily's Fidelius charm. Only I could have betrayed them. It was only a matter of time before the Aurors sought me out. I found him on a street crowded with Muggles, so I had to get close before I could stun him. I could have cared less about the Statute of Secrecy, but I wanted to get a clear shot. He spotted me at the last minute. He didn't pull out a wand, just a knife. I wondered if he'd lost his wand when he cut off his finger and dropped it to the ground... His behaviour was so bizarre I began to wonder if he'd been put under the Imperius. I suppose I didn't want to believe he'd willingly betrayed you. Then he dropped the knife and screamed at me for betraying James and Lily. He must have had his wand in his back pocket, because as I struggled through the crowd there was an explosion behind him that threw people to the ground like rag dolls. It blasted a hole all the way down to the sewers. He transformed and dropped through it before I could even speak."

Sirius' shoulders began to slump, as if telling his tale had extracted all the rigidity from his bones. He looked so tired and old that Harry could barely stand it.

"So we may be looking for a rat that's missing a toe... off the left forepaw?" he asked slowly.

Sirius shook his head. "The right," he corrected.

“Any other distinguishing marks?” Arthur asked quickly.

Sirius shook his head. “Just a common gray rat, a little on the fat side. It’s going to be almost impossible to find him.”

Harry smothered a grin as he noticed Arthur’s startled expression. “Well, at least we know what to look for. Are you allowed to receive post?”

Sirius shook his head. “I wouldn’t know. I doubt owls could get past the dementors.”

Harry frowned. “Is there anyone you would like me to contact?”

Sirius just frowned at him curiously.

Harry sighed. “I told you I believe you are innocent. Is there anyone out there you would like me to talk to? Family? Friends?” He regretted the way his godfather flinched at the mention of family, but he had to ask.

“There is one,” he said slowly. “I don’t know if he’s alive or where he lives now. Remus Lupin was a friend of mine and your parents’ friend as well. He... he should know the truth. If an owl cannot reach him, I imagine Arthur would know someone in the Ministry who can locate him.”

“Why is that?” Arthur asked.

“He... well he has a medical condition that is monitored by the Ministry,” he replied evasively.

“He thought you were the secret-keeper as well?” Harry asked.

Sirius sighed and tried to rub his eyes, but the chains on his arms would not allow it. Harry resisted a sudden impulse to rip them off his godfather. “At the time, there were rumours of a spy helping Voldemort. We thought it might have been him, so... we didn’t tell him.”

"And the spy turned out to be Pettigrew?" Arthur asked. The sympathy in his voice was palpable.

Sirius nodded and dropped his gaze. "It was all done so stupidly, really. I as good as killed your parents, Harry. I came up with the brilliant notion of secretly switching my role to Peter. Everyone knew how close James and I were, so I'd be the perfect decoy. Instead, I told James to trust the man who betrayed him."

"Rubbish!" Harry snapped. "You are as much to blame as my father, which is to say not at all. There's a rather large difference between being tricked and being a betrayer."

Sirius' head lifted suddenly and he stared at Harry.

Harry mentally kicked himself. *It's getting harder and harder to keep acting like a twelve year old... even a precocious one.* "I've read a lot of books about Voldemort's rise," he explained. "He tricked a lot of people, didn't he?"

"You have no idea, Harry," Sirius whispered. "I only saw him once, thank Merlin, but he's... well. It's hard to describe."

*Maybe this is an opportunity to act a little childish and make up for earlier,* Harry mused. "Well, I do have an idea. He snuck into Hogwarts last year trying to steal something. He possessed one of the Professors," he said airily.

His godfather stared at him in shock. "How do you know this?" he asked.

"I, er, sort of killed his host."

Sirius looked from Harry to Arthur, eyes widening. Mr. Weasley glanced sidelong at Harry and shook his head. "Ron told me about it. Harry stumbled across Professor Quirrell as he was trying to slip past the outer defences. Harry triggered it while he was in the middle."

Harry shrugged. "He tried to grab me after he was hurt. Whatever my Mum did that night finished him off when he laid hands on me." He was purposefully trying to act blasé about the whole incident.

Hopefully a little premeditated immaturity would set their minds at ease.

"I should hope that will not be necessary in the future," Arthur said crisply.

Harry shrugged. "From what that dark tosser said, I think I'm supposed to be the one who kicks his arse."

Arthur sighed, and just for an instant Harry thought he saw Sirius' lips twitch. He'd give almost anything to make the man smile. He'd spent twelve years in Azkaban, another year on the run, and then a final year under house arrest at Twelve Grimmauld Place... only to be murdered by his cousin trying to save Harry from his own stupidity. *'Between his rotten family and everything else, the poor bastard never got a break. Well, this time he's got me and it's going to be different. I don't care what I have to do, he's going to get out of here and live the life he deserves,'* Harry silently vowed.

"I don't want you seeking him out," the two men said, almost in unison. They looked at each other sharply and Harry almost laughed out loud.

"I promise I won't," Harry replied seriously. "I'm trying to learn as much as I can, as quickly as I can, so when he does come back, I'll be ready for him."

Arthur looked at Harry intently and the boy could almost feel him putting pieces together. His guardian nodded almost imperceptibly.

"So, you've finished your first year at Hogwarts?" Sirius asked, changing the subject.

Harry nodded gratefully. "This has probably been the best year of my life," he said in a wondering tone. "I made some good friends, I learned more than I'd thought possible, and I even got to play Quidditch."

"You play? For the house team?" Sirius leaned forward in his chair, and his eyes seemed almost lively. *He's as bad as Ron,* Harry thought with amusement.

Harry nodded. "Yeah, it was brilliant. I wasn't so crazy about the green and silver uniforms, but..." he let his voice trail off as Sirius' mouth fell open. "I'm joking, I was sorted into Gryffindor." He smiled slyly. "You should have seen the look on your face though."

Sirius stared at him and Harry began to wonder if he'd miscalculated. A constricted grunting sound came from Sirius' direction. As his godfather's eyes widened, it erupted into a rusty chuckle. Harry felt his eyes prickle as he heard his godfather laugh for what had to be the first time in eleven years.

They talked for almost two hours. Fortunately, Arthur seemed to be as interested in getting to know Sirius as vice-versa. When the Aurors began to shift uncomfortably and try to catch their eyes, Harry and his guardian reluctantly got up from their chairs.

On a sudden impulse, Harry leaned across the table and gripped Sirius' hand. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the Aurors tense, but they didn't intervene. "I'm going to raise bloody hell until they let you out of here, Sirius. I mean that."

Sirius' fingers were almost painfully tight around Harry's. Then he let go convulsively and leaned back in his chair, closing his eyes.

Harry turned, glaring at the Aurors, thinking one of them had done something. None of them, however, had their wands out. A couple of them actually looked disturbed at what they'd overheard. He supposed that made sense; they knew better than anyone what it was like in the actual cells. The idea that an innocent man had been sentenced to that would have to be especially horrifying.

Arthur led a reluctant Harry from the visiting room. Neither of them spoke as they walked out to the docks and boarded the ferry. When they'd finally walked past the camouflage charms, Arthur broke the silence.

"Harry, I don't want to head back to The Burrow immediately. I'm going to take us to the Ministry and place a few calls. Do you mind? I think your godfather's description has made me a little paranoid, but better safe than sorry."

Harry shook his head. He already had an idea of what was going on. Better to let Arthur run the show here. He knew he could trust the man to do the right thing, no matter what.

They Apparated to the Ministry, and Arthur checked them in and led Harry to the Misuse of Muggle Artefacts office. The office was large, but only contained a couple of desks, both unoccupied. The room had its own Floo fireplace, but the majority of the space was given over to large shelves and storage bins. The shelves contained all manner of odd items, most of which resembled junk or charity sale items.

Harry looked through these curiously as Arthur placed a series of Floo calls. He froze as he moved a tea set and saw a vaguely familiar shape of black metal and moulded plastic. It appeared to be a Glock 19, from the engraved logo near the muzzle. The war-mages in the American expeditionary force sometime carried side-arms like this. The soldiers usually had larger forty five calibre pistols, but the officers seemed to prefer the smaller nine millimetre design. While nowhere near as versatile as a wand, pistols had their advantages -- like being much faster to use.

Harry jumped when Arthur's voice came from directly behind him. "Ah, you stumbled onto one of our more interesting finds. This was seized from an Italian hit-wizard captured by the Aurors a fortnight ago." He picked up the pistol awkwardly. "These Muggle wands... fire-legs? No, fire-arms, that's it. They are quite odd. Anyway, this chap was a nasty piece of work. Had several Dark artefacts, a poisoned dagger and this little thing. We could tell it had several permanent charms placed on it: a self-cleaning enchantment and some sort of conjuration in the handle here." He shrugged and lifted the pistol. Harry instinctively cringed back. "Too bad it appears to have ruined it. The spells seem to have frozen the workings." He held it up, the muzzle dangerously close to his head, and pushed awkwardly on the trigger a few times. "See?"

Harry swallowed and nodded weakly. Arthur hadn't slipped his finger completely through the trigger guard, so he wasn't depressing the safety trigger. The warnings General Hastings' men had given him were screaming through his mind. *There is no such thing as an*



*unloaded gun! Never point a weapon at something you don't want dead!*

"Well, it was an interesting idea that fellow had, even if it didn't work. I might have another look at it tomorrow, though everything on this shelf is due to be destroyed. Mostly rubbish, but we can't let it fall into the wrong hands." He winked at Harry and smiled as he put the pistol back on the shelf.

Harry nodded weakly as the fireplace roared. When Arthur turned toward the green flames, Harry snatched the pistol off the shelf and shoved it into his robes, making sure nothing snagged on the trigger and muzzle was pointed away from him. This was complicated by how hard his hands were shaking. *Merlin's balls! It's a miracle he hasn't blown his bloody brains out with that thing!* He was distracted from his terror when Kingsley Shacklebolt stepped out of the fireplace.

"Hello," Arthur said brightly, "I see you got my message. I appreciate you coming on short notice."

The tall Auror smiled. "I don't think you'd call me out for a wild snitch chase. Now what was this about capturing a fugitive?"

Arthur glanced apologetically at Harry. "Er, Harry, when your godfather described that rat, it seemed awfully familiar."

Harry hoped the look of dawning comprehension on his face was convincing. "Scabbers?" he gasped.

Arthur nodded, looking uneasy. "I imagine he befriended Percy because he wanted to stay with us, a Wizarding family where he could overhear any news. The idea of that traitor living under my roof makes me physically ill."

Kingsley looked confused. "Traitor?"

"We've just been to see Sirius Black in Azkaban. The man is innocent."

"Arthur, what are you talking about?"

“Harry here,” Arthur smiled, “remembers some of the events that led up to him receiving that scar. His parents’ voices... they mentioned Peter being their secret keeper, not Sirius. When Black confronted Pettigrew that day, Peter cut off a finger and blasted the street. Peter then transformed into a rat and fled into the sewers. Pettigrew is an unregistered Animagus, and his form sounds very similar to a rat that’s been living with my family for the last eleven years.”

The Kingsley Shacklebolt Harry remembered was famous for being completely unflappable. He showed no emotion when he stepped out the front door of Grimmauld Place to face Voldemort himself. His sacrifice gave Remus, Tonks, and the rest of the Order members time to flee. This Kingsley was several years younger and unseasoned by war; he was gobsmacked. “This isn’t some joke?” he asked weakly.

“I wouldn’t joke about such a thing,” Arthur replied.

“Why did you call me for this? Surely...” Kingsley’s voice trailed off.

“You were very helpful when Harry was hurt. And you, er...” Arthur’s voice trailed off. Harry remembered then that Shacklebolt had neglected to mention the illegally enchanted car Arthur’s sons used to rescue Harry from the Dursleys.

“I see,” Kingsley said gravely. “Well then, let’s go see about this rat. I think we should be careful not to alarm it beforehand...”

Harry’s recent Floo trips improved his landings. He only fell to one knee when they returned to The Burrow. Mrs. Weasley was just cleaning up from the midday meal. “Auror Shacklebolt!” she exclaimed with a smile. “Can I get you a cuppa?”

“Not right now, Molly,” Arthur said in a loud voice. He looked over at Ron, who was helping stack dishes along with Ginny. “Is Scabbers upstairs?”

“Yeah, in my room,” he answered, but frowned, “Why Dad?”

Arthur nodded to Kingsley “Top of the stairs,” he said then turned back to his son. “There’s a nasty bit of magical distemper going

around, affecting rats and some other types of pets,” he explained in that loud voice again. “Kingsley is with the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. I asked him to check Scabbers and make sure he isn’t infected.”

Molly spun toward her husband when he misidentified Kingsley. Arthur gave her a very significant look and she said nothing. Harry couldn’t help but notice that she folded her dish towel so her hands were very close to the wand protruding from the pocket of her apron. Harry wasn’t sure if Ron and Ginny were carrying their wands, so he edged closer to his friends. He followed Arthur’s gaze and moved his eyes to watch the bottom of the stairs as well.

As they fell quiet, they couldn’t hear any voices upstairs. However, the distinctive crackle of a stunning spell broke the silence. A moment later, Kingsley was marching down the stairs carrying Scabbers’ cage. Inside the rat was stretched out, unconscious.

Ron looked furious, but Harry grabbed his arm before he could interfere.

“Any trouble?” Arthur asked quickly.

“No. Your story was a good cover. He didn’t suspect a thing until I had my wand on him.” Kingsley replied.

“What are you doing with Scabbers?” Ron asked in an alarmed tone.

“Ronald,” Arthur said, “We need to test him for something a bit more serious. Auror Shacklebolt, do you know the charm?”

“I believe I remember. It doesn’t see a lot of use but they cover it in Auror training, just in case.” He closed his eyes for a moment, lips moving slowly. “That’s it. *Animus Revalo!*” A flash of white light enveloped the rat, and suddenly it began to glow bright red. Kingsley nodded. “That’s it, he tested positive.”

“Harry?” Ron asked. His friend looked worried and confused.

“Scabbers isn’t really a rat,” Harry said slowly. “He’s an Animagus, a wizard transformed into a rat.”

Ron's eyes went wide. "Why on earth would someone masquerade as a rat?"

Harry sighed. "Because he betrayed my parents to Voldemort and framed my godfather for it," he said quietly. He turned and walked out the back door as he heard the roar of the Floo and Kingsley's voice calling for the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.

It was nearing dinner time when Ginny found him sitting cross-legged under a tree in the orchard. He'd been thinking about a lot of things. The murder of his parents, the knowledge that Wormtail had actually been captured this time, worry about how that would impact things, hope that Sirius would be freed soon. His thoughts spun in tighter and tighter circles, and he barely noticed when she thumped down next to him.

Even though it was covered by jeans and robes, he still jumped when she put her hand on his knee. "Are you all right in there, Harry?" she asked quietly.

"Mostly," he said. He remembered when Ginny made him promise to *never* tell her again that he was 'fine'. *Of course, this wasn't the same Ginny, was it?* he thought hollowly.

"Really?" she asked with surprise. "If I'd had a day like yours I'd be ready to hex something."

Harry chuckled in spite of himself.

Ginny scowled at him. She began ticking off points on her fingers. "Let's see. You get to see your godfather, who appears to be having a rough go of it, Dad thinks. You find out who really betrayed your parents and how they got away with it. You come back here and watch them actually catch the no-good toe-rag, which no doubt has you thinking about how you lost your parents. No," she concluded dryly, "No good reason to be even slightly upset."

Harry went very still. For an instant, he was fifteen years old in number twelve Grimmauld place and Ginny was telling him where to get off. He'd been so worried about being possessed by Voldemort he'd forgotten to even ask her what it felt like. His hand tightened

around the one she'd laid on his knee. He didn't even remember grasping it. His eyes were fixed on the ground.

Ginny gave his knee a squeeze before she pulled her hand back and stood up. Harry felt a stab of self-pity before he ruthlessly squelched it. *I'm probably making her uncomfortable*, he realized. *I should have expected that... No one wants to see the Boy-Who-Lived acting weak*, he concluded bitterly.

He let out a grunt when Ginny plopped down in his lap. She sat with her legs stretched out to his left, but twisted around until she was facing him. She wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled his head down to her shoulder. Harry froze again. The fabric of her blouse was warm on his forehead. He was glad the pistol had been shoved under his armpit when he sat down.

"Mum did this for Daddy when Uncle Bilius died," Ginny murmured. "Harry, you're *supposed* to be sad when people die. It would be weird if you didn't."

Harry shuddered, but managed not to cry. He didn't know what to do with his arms until he wrapped them around her waist. She shifted, and he started to pull back but she tightened her arms around his neck. Her breath tickled his skin. For a moment, he allowed himself to forget.

He didn't know how long they sat there before they heard Ron calling out that dinner was ready. Ginny sat up and Harry realized he'd almost dozed off. She stood up and he followed, wincing at the pins and needles sensation flooding his legs.

"Thanks Ginny," he murmured as they walked back to The Burrow.

She smiled impishly at him. "What are friends for?" she asked.

He remembered another eleven year old girl putting her elbow in the butter dish. *Things are changing*, he thought with a sense of wonder. Another strange feeling began to flutter at the base of his stomach. It took him a moment to identify it.

For the first time in years, Harry Potter felt the faint stirrings of hope.

A/N

Sorry, wife got some vacation time over the holiday. Got to keep my beta happy!

Scabbers' time **has** come.

Comments:

Yes, this Snape is different from canon. Harry's outright defiance the first day of class (instead of taking it like a good little whipping boy) has gotten them off to an even uglier start than in canon. Malfoy paying him information on Harry (due no doubt to Draco's reports on getting beaten by Potter) hasn't helped the situation either. Experiences do shape personalities, or at least how a personality will react to certain people.

Harry may also not be handling Dumbledore in the optimal manner as well.

I've gotten some questions on my yahoo group regarding pre-emptive horcrux hunting. The reason why Harry isn't doing this is quite plainly stated in the prologue. Email me or check the yahoo group for details.

Harry isn't perfect. He's started to become aware that he's acting overly precocious at times. (On the other hand, I have a cousin who exhibited a college aged vocabulary at age eight.) Even with the arrested development during the second war, he doesn't always sound like a twelve year old. Acting like a compulsive bookworm is helping, but he still has slips - being around Hermione helps. At the hearing he was so worried about the outcome that he went all out.

Okay, that's it for now. Hopefully next chapter will be up a little quicker. I had to go back and re-outline second year again to make something work better for fourth year. I will say that I think I've come up with a way to handle the diary that hasn't been done yet...

Thanks for reading!

-Matthew

## Chapter 17

This was the strangest summer of Ginevra Weasley's life.

Actually, it had been a strange year. She expected to be lonely when Ron went off to Hogwarts and left her alone at The Burrow. Instead, she'd made a new friend. She hadn't quite known what to make of the strange boy that walked up to her Mum, asking how to get onto platform nine and three quarters. Mum was busy watching Ron go through the barrier and hadn't heard him, so she volunteered. The poor thing looked so lost and lonely.

He was also embarrassingly shy. His face went bright red as he agreed to follow her, which was kind of funny. It wasn't like she was special or anything, but he was so polite it made her feel like she was. When she took his hand to lead him through the barrier, she felt him shaking a little. She didn't see his family and wondered why they weren't there to see him off.

She felt even worse when he asked her if she was coming to Hogwarts. Since she had to wait another year, he'd be sure to forget her by then. When he asked if he could write to her she felt incredibly flattered, even as she was saddened as her suspicions about his family were confirmed. He seemed almost sad that he had to get on the train.

She was still thinking about this when Fred and George ran back to Mum to announce that they'd just been pranked by none other than Harry Potter. She couldn't believe that sad little boy was the hero she'd heard so many stories about. Why was he so lonely? Didn't the people he lived with know who he was?

She edged a little closer to the compartment he'd entered while her Mum said goodbye to Percy and the twins. She could have sunk through the platform when she heard Ron start badgering Harry about talking to her. Her brother had gotten a little odd once he realized that he'd be starting at Hogwarts without her. On the other hand, she thought her face would catch fire when she heard Harry sticking up for her. When he called her pretty she thought her heart would stop.

Ginny had six older brothers, but she still understood the concept of 'pretty', and she wasn't it. Not with her bright red hair, nonexistent figure, and bad temper.

Still he was smiling when he stuck his head out the window a minute later and she hastily looked away. Of course the twins immediately started teasing her about sending her a toilet seat of all things, and having Harry sign it. He must have really impressed them somehow, for them to even think about letting him in on one of their pranks.

Still, she couldn't resist running after the train a few steps to wave goodbye. She wouldn't see them for months! She was surprised when Harry waved - he had no family there, so it must have been her he was waving at. She barely remembered to wave back before the train moved out of sight.

It wasn't until she got home that it really struck her. She was all alone.

Her Mum and Dad were there of course. But she'd gotten *awfully* used to having her brothers around. Ron alone was enough to keep The Burrow from being too quiet. With him gone she was left sitting in her room crying quietly. She tried to distract herself thinking about the boy she'd met today. It was hard to think of him as The Boy Who Lived. Her eyes didn't latch onto his scar – it was his eyes that had captured her attention. They were a brilliant green, but something else... He looked so lost, which made sense she supposed, with his parents gone. No one was there to show him through the barrier. Thinking about that look in his eyes made her chest ache and she cried harder.

He'd seemed... happy somehow, to see her, which was quite odd. Of course, heading off to Hogwarts, he was sure to forget her. Though he did say she was pretty.

She muffled her sobs, mortified, when her Mum knocked on her door.

Fall got off to a very slow start. Ginny couldn't help but mope a bit. Mum seemed determined to cheer her up, whether she wanted to be or not. Her first attempt at knitting had been a disaster, and she was quite relieved when it burst into flames. She tried to distract herself



writing truly horrid poetry, but she was so embarrassed by the results that they were promptly banished to her sock drawer.

That all changed when she saw Hedwig.

Harry's owl was a gorgeous creature, covered with soft, dazzling white feathers. Mum had been less than impressed when she couldn't get the letter from the owl's leg. However, the owl was docile enough when Ginny reached forward and untied the parchment.

Harry had written her a letter.

More than a letter, it was practically a diary of his first week at Hogwarts. She'd never had someone write to her like that before. Bill had sent her a couple of post cards from Cairo, and Charlie had sent her a couple of letters from Romania. But Harry had to have spent hours and hours writing this one, covering pages and pages of parchment. She didn't understand why he'd gone to so much effort, but it gave her a warm glow. He really did want her to know everything that was going on at Hogwarts. Her brothers always promised to write, and they did... but they weren't really letter writers. Judged solely on volume, Harry had sent her more in one go than Percy and the twins did in all of last year. She didn't understand why he went to so much effort, unless he was terribly lonely.

Just like her, she supposed.

When she finished the marathon letter, she noticed Mum looking at her rather oddly. When she explained why Harry was writing to her, Mum just got very teary-eyed and hugged her tightly.

Mum was always after her about learning cooking and cleaning charms, which was sort of annoying since she didn't seem to expect Ron or the twins to learn them. Harry's letters gave her a chance to force the constant lessons into some type of structure, like when Mum taught her to read and write. The questions he asked seemed to break things down logically.

Mum also didn't seem to be as eager to find things for her to do when she was occupied with writing a letter back to Harry. That was an extra benefit.

Ginny really enjoyed Harry's letters, so she didn't want him to feel short-changed when she wrote him back. The problem was that there wasn't as much going on at home as there seemed to be at Hogwarts. She worried that if she responded back with a short letter, he might not include as many details in his next message.

So she told him more about herself and her family. She told him family stories that dated back to when her parents were young. Ginny learned at a tender age that she'd hear a lot more if she kept quiet when other people talked... and she had a very good memory.

She wrote about the twins' first prank war with Bill and Charlie.

She wrote about their first year at Hogwarts and all the howlers Mum had sent them.

She wrote about the first time Bill came home with a pony-tail, and the fuss Mum made over it.

She wrote about the first time Charlie came home with a huge burn bandage on his arm and the even bigger fuss Mum made over that.

She wrote about her Dad's fascination with Muggle technology, and how it sometimes drove Mum spare.

But she also wrote about how her Mum stayed up nights watching the family clock when Dad was working late.

Harry's next letter to her was even longer. It was sort of funny how Mum started asking her how everyone was doing at Hogwarts. Ron did finally write her, but his letters were always rather short and to the point.

Halloween had been utterly horrible. She overheard the Professor telling Mum about the Troll, and that Ron was all right. But she didn't know if Harry was hurt. She ran down the stairs but Mum had already locked the kitchen door. She pounded on the wood, even after she heard the fireplace roar from Floo powder. The waiting was one of the worst things she could ever remember. Her mind conjured up all kinds of gruesome things that could have happened to her friend. When Mum finally opened the door she'd been nearly hysterical.

It was a relief to know that Harry wasn't badly hurt, though her stomach twisted as she wondered what 'hurt arm' really meant. Moreover, she was glad Harry and Ron's other friends weren't injured. She had a feeling from his letters that Harry would rather get hurt himself, than feel guilty about someone else's wounds.

Harry didn't know she already knew about the Troll, but she still felt special when he told her all about it, and asked her not to say anything to Mum until Ron had a chance to talk to her. It felt -- nice -- to know he trusted her with secrets. It struck her that Harry had never treated her like a baby -- ever. Harry's trust in her was really driven home when she was put in the odd position of reassuring Mum and Dad about Ron's grades. He'd told her more about how they were all doing than Ron was willing to admit to his own parents.

When Mum and Dad told her they would get to go to Romania for Christmas she was excited about seeing Charlie. At the same time, she felt a little sorry for Harry with no family. With the timing of the conference and the end of fall term, Ron would have to stay at Hogwarts as well. She expected him to be upset at being excluded from the trip, but he wrote back that he was happy staying with Harry.

She sent Ron an especially big box of chocolate frogs for Christmas.

When Mum talked to her about giving knitting another go, and how home-made gifts mean more, she impulsively decided to make something for Harry. She didn't imagine anyone had ever made anything for him before, so that would make it even more special.

Unfortunately, her knitting needles refused to cooperate. In the end, she did produce what could laughably be called a scarf. As long as one didn't look too closely. Unfortunately, by the time she realized that, it was too late to try something else, and she didn't have any present money left. Mum tried to reassure her it looked fine, but she knew she was just trying to make her feel better.

Romania was fun, but very, very cold. Unfortunately, she also had plenty of time to worry about Harry's reaction. She knew he wouldn't say anything mean about her pitiful gift, and that made it even worse. She'd confided in Harry that she wanted to play Quidditch when she came to Hogwarts, and even admitted to 'borrowing' her brothers'

brooms, something no one else knew. When he sent her that wonderful book on Quidditch she felt even worse about that stupid scarf. While Hedwig was thawing out near the fire, she gave in to her guilt and wrote a quick note to him apologizing for her awful gift. She hoped he didn't burn the photograph she'd included of them.

When she got his reply, she didn't really know whether to feel elated or embarrassed. Harry basically agreed with Mum, and said that this was the best Christmas he'd ever had. Later on, she'd realize that this was really the first time he'd ever gotten to properly celebrate the holiday, and that knowledge left her feeling hollow inside. He was so *nice!* And his aunt and uncle treated him so *awful!* She sat in her long awaited hot bath back at The Burrow and couldn't stop crying for some reason.

Things seemed to get better over the spring, and she began looking forward to seeing him again at King's Cross. But his last letter was very disturbing, at turns cryptic and terrifying. He'd actually confronted He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named *inside of Hogwarts!* The idea of that Dark Wizard actually penetrating Hogwarts was awful -- it felt like a rug had been pulled out from under her perception of what should be unquestionably safe and secure. She knew better than to say anything to Mum. Despite her parents' faith in Professor Dumbledore, she didn't want to chance them having second thoughts about letting her attend next year. Harry's closing remarks were even stranger. With all he'd told her over the year, she couldn't imagine what he was still keeping back from her -- and a scared voice in her head said maybe it was better if she didn't know.

But she couldn't ignore the plea woven through his words. He seemed to be afraid of alienating her. Why was he so worried about what she thought?

Seeing Harry again at the train station had been a shock. He'd worn that ruddy scarf, no matter that it was summer. He said he'd picked up a cold, but she didn't really believe it, and that made her feel -- well, it was hard to describe, really. Nice was a good word, but rather vague.

Harry's aunt and uncle hadn't shown up to collect him. She felt a flash of guilt that she'd been happy about such a thing, but it did mean that she got to spend a little more time with him than she would otherwise. The ride back to The Burrow on the Knight Bus seemed to be over far too quickly. She didn't understand the panicky feeling she got as the bus zoomed off and disappeared.

Mum was quite irate about Ron breaking his wand, and even more so when he showed her the money Harry had given him to replace it. The story about Harry accidentally breaking it seemed a bit off, but her brother was a terrible liar – one look at his ears and you'd know the truth. He hadn't made it up.

But when Mum asked Ron why Harry dressed so raggedly when he obviously had money, her big brother, her Ronnie, almost broke down crying when he started ranting about Harry's legal guardians -- the people he was returning to as they looked at each other.

She couldn't stand it. She wasn't going to let them see her cry so she ran up to her room before she broke down.

She didn't like crying. She didn't like how she felt before, during, or after bawling her eyes out. But it seemed like every time she'd broken down during this strange, strange year, it was related to Harry Potter. She ought to resent the emotional upheaval he'd brought into her life, but somehow she couldn't.

That little seed of resentment would soon come back to haunt her. Hedwig didn't return to The Burrow. She and Ron sent letters with Errol, and even the twins got into the act. Errol always returned with empty talons and no replies were sent with other owls.

Errol wasn't always the most reliable owl -- he'd been in the family for decades, and he'd gotten a bit disoriented in his old age. After two weeks though, Ginny was getting really worried. Harry hadn't gone more than a week between letters, even when he had a badly broken arm. Something was wrong. Something was dreadfully wrong.

She talked to her parents, but they were a little uneasy about talking to Muggles who might not take kindly to an inquiry about their nephew. She always had the feeling that Mum didn't really believe

things were as bad as Harry admitted. It wasn't that she thought he was dishonest -- it was more like she didn't want to believe it.

When she realized that, Ginny gained a new perspective on her Mum. She'd always wondered if Mum felt bad about having so many children. As the youngest, Ginny sometimes wondered if she'd really been wanted. Realizing that Mum couldn't even imagine having a child and not loving it was reassuring. Just because they didn't like the same things didn't mean Mum would stop caring about her -- however much she might roll her eyes if her daughter took up the unladylike sport of Quidditch.

Dad did promise that if they hadn't heard from Harry a week after his Birthday, he'd make an official inquiry at work. He explained that it was a little touchy, interfering with a Muggle household, and even more since Harry was the famous Boy Who Lived.

As the days counted down to Harry's birthday with no word, Ginny felt an increasing anxiety. Something was wrong. Even if Harry didn't want to write to her anymore, she couldn't imagine him not telling her so. When she shared her fears with Ron, she was pleasantly surprised that he didn't dismiss or question her. They both went and talked to the twins, who surprisingly carried on an entire conversation on a serious topic without making a single joke. Soon Fred and George were trading significant glances and moving things about the house. She wasn't sure what preparations they were making, and she wasn't sure she wanted to know.

She should, however, have known that they would make their move when Dad didn't come home for dinner. She'd gone to bed that night and vague dreams of Harry in trouble plagued her rest. She woke up in the morning to complete pandemonium.

She was about to lay one on Ron for roughly shaking her awake, but when she saw his face; her hand fell limply to the covers. "Harry," he said roughly. "Mum Apparated him straight to Saint Mungo's." She wasn't even aware if Ron left her room while she dressed.

She was downstairs hearing the full story from Ron and the twins when Dad stepped out of the fireplace. His timing was good, because if Percy said one more word about how that flying car was going to

get everyone in trouble the consequences would have been dire. Her father asked her if she'd rather wait with the Lovegoods, but he didn't sound like he really expected her to take him up on it. She liked Luna, and she'd been over to see her a few times, but the girl was so quiet and withdrawn that it was hard to carry on a conversation. As anxious as Ginny was, she'd probably be ready to strangle someone within the hour. She shook her head at her father and followed them through the Floo network.

It was days before she got to see Harry, and he still looked awful. He looked so small lying there, yet he still made jokes. Why was he so happy? Ginny wasn't lying when she told Mum she didn't really want any lunch. Her stomach was rolling over like a wheel from looking at her best friend, covered in bruises and bandages.

When Ron tossed Harry his scarf, she was confused and embarrassed. Something passed between her brother and his friend, but she didn't really understand it. Her brothers had rescued Harry, and she felt almost cheated that she hadn't been there to help. Reading that stupid newspaper to him was a poor substitute, but at least he was able to laugh a few times before Mum returned to collect her. He even managed to tease her about chewing on her hair.

She didn't really understand why he still wanted to read the letters she'd written. Something about the way he described it -- 'I just like knowing what you were thinking when you wrote it. There's a little piece of you in there, you know.' It made her shiver a bit, even as she blushed.

She had no idea why he kept doing things like that to her.

After dinner that night, Dad called a Family Meeting. Usually that means that they will be discussing something of major importance to the entire family. His announcement certainly qualified.

"Well, your Mother and I have talked things over with Harry, and we're filing paperwork with the Ministry to become Harry's legal guardians. He's coming here when he's discharged from Saint Mungo's."

The dead silence that followed that announcement was broken by the scrape of Ron's chair on the kitchen floor. Her brother, who wasn't big on public displays of affection, was standing next to his seated father, hugging him around the shoulders. The twins might have said something, but they were a little choked up as well. Percy was frowning, but didn't say anything. Her mum was staring at her husband and youngest son when Ginny got up from her chair and walked over to her as well. She whispered "Thank you," as she hugged her mother.

"I didn't do it for you, dear," Mum whispered back, returning the hug.

"I know," Ginny said, sniffing.

Of course, the twins put on a big show when they returned to Saint Mungo's to visit Harry. She'd brought her letters as he requested, but her brothers brought the rest of the mail as well. Percy hadn't expressed much interest in coming, which puzzled her. When she asked Ron about it, her brother shrugged and explained that Percy wasn't terribly fond of Harry. He'd broken a lot of rules at Hogwarts, he didn't get along with some of the Professors, and he and his friends had cost Gryffindor a lot of house points.

"But that's silly!" she exclaimed. "Besides, you still won the house cup, didn't you?"

Ron shrugged. "That doesn't matter. You know how Percy is about rules."

While she agreed that was in character for the third Weasley son, the fact that he'd carry that antipathy outside of school made her see him in a different, less flattering, light.

When Harry opened the letter from Gringotts, she started to see him a little differently too. The grin on his face would have done the twins proud. This was only confirmed when they told Mum about the dragon. Ginny was furious that they told on Harry though, and let them know in no uncertain terms.

That was when Fred and George decided to play dirty. She wanted to die on the spot when they said she didn't want to have Harry as a



'brother'. She knew very well what they were implying, but she was too young for that and it was horribly embarrassing and HOW COULD THEY SAY THAT IN FRONT OF HIM?

She was about to run out of the room when Harry, of all people, got angry and yelled at them. Well, he didn't yell, but he looked angry and his voice was very direct. And the twin terrors apologized. Would wonders never cease? She had to sit down after that as Harry began going through his accumulated letters. She couldn't imagine why some crazy house elf was stealing his post, but she was glad he'd gotten it back. She also noticed that Harry was saving her letters in a different stack. She wondered if that meant he wasn't interested in reading them, or was he saving them for later?

When Harry got out of hospital, he tried to fit in at The Burrow, but it was a little odd. He didn't act like a guest, but Ginny had never known a boy who would help in the kitchen without being dragged by the ear. No sooner did he get settled than he was back down there helping her peel potatoes. He was so weird.

She started working again, but she was a little distracted by his presence. He whispered to her to be careful, because Ron would tease her if she cut her thumb. She got a warm glow from that. In their letters, she told him how her older brothers tended to always treat her like a helpless baby. Now Harry was siding with her on that issue, just like in his replies. He didn't think she was a baby, and he wanted to help her prove it to Ron and the rest.

If someone told her a year ago that the Boy Who Lived would become such a good friend, she'd have thought they were mental. It was almost uncanny how Harry always knew the right thing to say. Maybe she'd said more in those letters than she realized, but sometimes he seemed to know her better than she knew herself. It should have made her feel weird, but it didn't.

There was, however, no confusion regarding her feelings for Harry's aunt and uncle. She hated them with every fibre of her being. Harry didn't like them too much either, but he seemed to almost regard them as not worth worrying about, now that he was shed of them. But they'd hurt him so badly... he almost died... just thinking about that

made her want to throw up. Overhearing that they might have done something to keep Harry from coming to live at The Burrow was even worse.

Ginny awoke instantly that night when she heard the stair below her landing creak. The twins were probably up to something, and the lack of subsequent noises meant it wasn't her parents. She wondered if they were already returning from their mischief so she carefully checked her door for pranks before opening it. She was light enough that her weight wouldn't make any of the steps creak, not to mention her visits to the broom shed had given her a lot of practice at being quiet. The door to the twins' room was shut, but she could hear harsh breathing coming from the sitting room.

Seeing Harry leap from the couch with his wand out almost made her scream... but he was so embarrassed that she couldn't get angry. She wondered what kind of dreams could make a boy who faced Voldemort unable to sleep, but she knew she couldn't press him. Not with the anguish on his face and in his voice.

Ginny tried to reassure him before she went back to her room, but she wasn't sure how effective she was. She was a long time getting back to sleep.

She was a little surprised when Harry agreed to her joining them on their morning runs like it was the most natural thing in the world. She was especially gratified when Harry argued with Ron on her behalf. Normally, that would irritate her, but it didn't when Harry did it. She also realized that he could convince her brother a lot easier than she could. Some of his arguments were a little ominous in their implications... Harry seemed to consider Hogwarts to be a dangerous place. While that argument convinced Ron, it sent a chill down Ginny's spine.

She wanted to ask Harry about that, so she dressed quickly and volunteered to help Mum run errands at Diagon Alley. They'd barely gotten started when Percy's owl found them. Mum was torn, but she agreed to let Ginny wait for Harry while she sorted out the trespassing reporter.

Harry looked so grim when he entered the lobby that she couldn't help but tease him about his language. At least it got the frown off his face. When she agreed to go shopping with him, she felt very mature. They were going to take care of things for Harry without Mum having to do everything. She didn't, however, expect Harry to buy her a wand. She honestly tried to talk him out of it, but he was so adamant that she needed to have a wand attuned to her magic.

That gave her chills as she remembered what he'd implied about Hogwarts not being safe. It also made her realize that breaking Ron's wand wasn't really an accident. She laughed at Harry's cajolery, but part of her began to wonder what secrets Harry had to save for later.

Clothes shopping for Harry was quite fun, even though his tastes were a bit dark for her. Anything would be better than those ragged cast-offs he'd gotten from those awful Dursleys. Her happy thoughts came to an abrupt halt when Percy started yelling at them. Harry, however, wasn't at all cowed by her prefect brother. As much as Percy seemed to be cool toward Harry, Harry seemed to be unimpressed by the most accomplished of her brothers.

Of course, as soon as they got home, Percy immediately tried to get them in trouble. For all that Harry wasn't intimidated by Percy; he seemed to wither when Dad used his serious voice. When Harry flinched away from the hand on his shoulder she wanted to be sick. He'd been afraid of getting hit.

After he went upstairs, Mum started in on her. It was worse when Mum didn't yell. When she spoke quietly, but intently, you knew she really meant it, and that she wasn't just on a tear. She talked a lot about how Harry must be feeling, and how lonely he had to be. Ginny had thought about this a lot, and she agreed with most of it. When Mum started in about how insecure Harry had to be, and how he'd do anything to keep his friends, she started wondering where this was going.

"Now Ginny, I know some people would be tempted to let Harry buy them things, or spend money taking them places. I know Harry has a lot of money left to him by his parents, and he doesn't really care that much about it. But whether he wants to spend it or not doesn't matter.

Only an awful person would take advantage of all the bad luck Harry has had. Only a really selfish person would let Harry buy them things or take his money. Your father and I had to agree to some things before Harry would agree to come home with us. The poor dear has had it beaten into him that he's such a bother that he... well he insists on contributing toward the grocer's bill. But I don't want you or your brothers bothering him for presents! Do you understand me, Ginevra? I know your birthday is coming up, but I want it to be a surprise to Harry so he won't feel awkward about not having a gift for you."

She nodded dumbly as her stomach rolled over. Harry didn't want her to say anything about the wand, and she wouldn't betray his confidence, but Mum was going to kill her. She could barely keep her lunch down.

She'd never dreaded her birthday before.

She distracted herself that afternoon by getting a potion from Fred and using it to get Percy back for embarrassing Harry. But she still felt awful as she pretended to read a book and watched Harry and Ron play chess. That night she tossed and turned, wondering if Mum was right and if she'd actually become an awful person. Had she maybe hinted in one of her letters that she wanted a new wand? Had she looked enviously at Ron when he talked about his wand? Finally, she gave up after a nightmare about Mum screaming at her and kicking her out of the house.

She pulled some clothes on and crept down the stairs. Sometimes flying would clear her head. At least the moon was bright enough to see by. She was finally starting to calm down when she saw motion near the garden. She thought she'd been caught by her brothers, but when she flew closer she saw Harry.

All the pent up guilt and worry boiled over when he offered to let her use his racing broom. Surprisingly enough, he knew exactly what was bothering her. She couldn't help but tell him what Mum said. That got him very angry. When he asked her if she was a -- one of *those* women, she wanted to hit him.

Then he proceeded to rant about how wrong Mum was, and how she was nothing like that. As he wound down, she realized he was

actually complimenting her, and saying he *knew* she would never take advantage of him. He knew it like he knew the sun rose in the East. By the time he finished talking, she was calm again. They would handle Mum and Dad if they needed to.

As she helped Harry cook breakfast for everyone, she thought a lot about his words. When Mum gave her that talking to, her words were like caramels with fish hooks imbedded inside. They were nice, friendly, and polite, but it wasn't until the implications sank in that they really started to hurt. Harry's words to her in the garden were like a snowball thrown at your face. They were cold and shocking at first, to get your attention. But there wasn't any lasting ache or injury.

Making breakfast together was almost therapeutic. Harry was a good cook, though he tended to do things the Muggle way. By the time Mum came down the stairs, Ginny was able to face her without a scowl.

Of course, Fred had to be a prat, and Ron started nagging Harry about how much sleep he was getting. But the highlight of the meal was when Percy got his comeuppance. It was a relief to get outside before she lost her temper and spoiled things.

It was also a relief to understand why Harry was keeping things secret, even if the Occlumency exercises were hard to do. She got a bad shock when Harry talked about transferring to Beauxbatons, and she was glad that he was only bluffing. She almost wished Harry wasn't teaching the twins how to defend their minds, but that was a mean thought. And after she explained about Percy's underwear, her brothers didn't look anxious to cross her again.

Her birthday party went better than she expected, probably because she made a point of opening Harry's present last. The brooch Bill sent her was probably more expensive, but that didn't matter to Mum. The look on her mother's face made Ginny want to sink into the floor.

Her brothers all left under that glare, but Harry wouldn't. After the way he reacted to Dad after they returned from Diagon Alley, Ginny did not expect Harry to stand up to her parents the way he did. He was never disrespectful, but he was... very firm. He explained why Hogwarts wasn't always safe, though her parents required more

details than she had. Oddly enough, while Mum got angry, Dad stayed very calm. He looked at Harry thoughtfully and asked if he'd thought it all out ahead of time.

When Harry confirmed that he was worried about their safety and asked if they still wanted him living there, Ginny could barely keep herself from yelling at him to stop. She didn't want Mum to send him away, but she didn't think Harry would want her to interrupt. Mum got very weepy and hugged both of them. Ginny froze when Harry hugged Mum back and one of his arms went around her waist as well.

Ginny thought about how Harry had spoken after they left for his guardianship hearing. Anything was better than sitting around with her brothers worrying. She'd never seen anyone change Mum's mind once it was made up. The key, she was sure, lay in his composure. He didn't get mad, he didn't get upset. Well he got upset the time before, but that was because he felt guilty when he figured out why Dad was upset. This last time, Harry thought he was doing the right thing, so he just calmly explained his reasons -- and then Dad calmed Mum down. Mum was used to dealing with the famous Weasley temper, wasn't she? Being logical seemed to catch her off balance. Ginny filed that idea away for future reference.

The look on Mum's face when she emerged from the Floo alarmed Ginny. She was smiling and crying at the same time. Ginny felt like crying herself when Mum grabbed her and Ron into a bone-breaking hug. What had the Ministry done with poor Harry?

When her mother said they'd been granted guardianship of Harry, Ginny's knees almost buckled.

"Why are you crying then?" Ron asked.

"Well, because I am so proud of my children," Mum replied. "Harry had to speak to the court, and all he could talk about was what good friends you two were. Harry went on and on about how you saved his life and helped with his studies and didn't care about his money or his fame or, or... I'm just so proud of you, all of you. I know I don't always say it, but I am. The Malfoys and the Diggorys went on about how they had so much money, or big houses with security, or all that rubbish. And little Harry got up and talked about what great people

the Weasleys were, and how wonderful his friends were. I could just burst!"

Mum squeezed them again and Ginny thought she was going to start seeing spots before she let go.

Of course, when Mum told them that Harry and Dad were still filling out paperwork, that was their cue to begin preparing a special lunch with as many of Harry's favourites as Ron could remember from Hogwarts. There must have been a lot of paperwork, because they were done well before Harry and Dad returned.

When the twins began dancing that ridiculous jig, Ginny couldn't help but grab Ron and join in. Harry's relieved laughter was more than worth a little embarrassment. Ginny seemed to find herself doing more and more ridiculous things lately.

Still, she wasn't prepared when Harry grabbed her hand and pulled her out of the house to go play Quidditch. She didn't have a broom, other than the toy one the twins had given her for her birthday. She didn't fancy sitting around watching her brothers play like some useless tag-along. But Harry was so happy, and he wanted her to come, so she gave in. Besides, his fingers wrapped around her elbow were so warm...

When Harry landed, holding his shoulder, she was concerned he'd hurt himself. But his eyes were smiling as he held out his broom to her. When he stepped forward and taunted her about showing her brothers, his smile was kindly, not mean. She still hesitated. If anything happened to his broom...

Oddly enough, it was Ron warning Harry about that very thing that made up her mind. She grabbed the broom from Harry's hands and took off into the air as fast as she could. It felt really... good... to fly loops around her brothers, leaving them gobsmacked. She knew she had a faster broom than they did, but as Ron had once reminded her when he refused to let her use his: "The better the broom, the better the flyer has to be to handle it". Making him eat those words was a delicious experience.

Ginny had never gotten to compete with her bigger and stronger brothers on an even playing field before. But on a broom, being smaller meant the broom would accelerate faster. She'd likely never play beater, but for a chaser, speed and manoeuvrability were everything.

In short, she kicked all their arses. And it felt good.

She did feel a twinge of conscience when they all landed for dinner. Harry probably hadn't meant for her to use his broom the whole afternoon. But when she tried to apologize, he just laughed it off. He said he'd rather watch her play chaser than play himself. She wondered if Harry was coming down with something.

It had taken some cajolery the following day to get Dad to explain why Harry wanted to go to Azkaban. Ginny could have asked him herself, but she had a feeling it was painful for Harry to talk about. She wanted to ask her father why the Ministry didn't want to free Sirius if he was innocent, but she had a feeling the answer wasn't one she wanted to hear.

Not knowing what else to do, she just focused on the training with Harry and Ron. She didn't want Harry worrying about her, either because he thought she couldn't defend herself, or because he didn't think she could keep his secrets. She thought she was going to cry when Harry couldn't stand to watch her spar with Ron anymore. That made her work even harder. There was no way she could become stronger than her big brother, but she could definitely become faster.

When Harry and Dad returned, they were accompanied by a tall black man with a shaved head. Ron was upset when they stunned his rat Scabbers and carried him out in his cage, but that was nothing compared to the bomb Harry dropped.

That rat was a wizard, one responsible for his parents' murder.

Harry slipped out the back door while everyone was staring at each other. He evidently didn't want company because Ginny had to check almost every tree in the orchard before she found him near the back corner. He was sitting cross-legged, staring downward. She didn't even want to think of how upset he had to be.



Harry barely noticed when she sat down, but he started violently when she touched his knee. He seemed so... wrapped up in his misery that she could hardly stand to watch it. At least he laughed a little when she said she'd be hexing people in his shoes.

She tried to draw him out a little, get him talking, by listing all the valid reasons he had for being upset, but something still made him freeze up. She reluctantly stood up, wondering if he'd rather be left alone. At that point she decided that she'd rather irritate him by being there when he didn't want it, than leave him alone when he might possibly need her.

So she took her courage in her hands and sat down in his lap.

He didn't protest. He didn't shove her away. He didn't even flinch back. He shook a little when she pulled his head down onto her shoulder. The back of his neck was hot under her forearms. He shook again, and she wondered if he was on the brink of crying.

Then he wrapped his arms around her. She was so surprised she had to rebalance herself. Harry started to pull back, but she tightened her arms around his neck to let him know it was all right.

It was a powerful feeling, sitting there holding each other as the afternoon slipped away. She listened to Harry's ragged breathing calm down little by little. By the time Ron called them in for dinner, she'd almost been dozing in the warm august evening. She felt a warm glow spread over her body as they stood up and Harry thanked her.

Maybe her friend needed her as much as she needed him.

Such a wonderful, but strange, year.

Harry could barely look at Ginny during dinner that evening. If they'd been older, he knew that they would have gotten some odd looks when they returned to The Burrow. For a couple of hours, he was sixteen again, and Ginny was holding him the day after Dumbledore died -- before he stupidly tried to protect her by pushing her away. It seems that Ginny always instinctively knew how to make him feel better.

Molly seemed to sense his turmoil, because she simply set out plates for them without asking questions. Ron, on the other hand, looked a bit ill.

“Harry, mate, I’m sorry I-“

“Ron, if it’s about Scabbers, you have nothing to apologize for.”

“Still, if I-“

“Ronald,” Arthur Weasley cut in, “none of the rest of us thought his lifespan was anything to be suspicious about. Stop blaming yourself, son.”

“He even put one over on the twins,” Harry added.

Fred scowled at that, but George elbowed him and nodded. “That little rat fooled a lot of people, o’ brother of mine.”

“Like the entire Wizarding world, and his best friends,” Harry added darkly. Ginny frowned, so Harry took a deep breath and tried to smile. “Look mate, when we go to Diagon Alley for our books, we can check out Magical Menagerie, yeah?” Their school letters had arrived almost unnoticed the day of the guardianship hearing.

“Just no more rats,” Ron said with a shudder. “Maybe an owl...”

Harry shrugged. “If you like, but I don’t think Hedwig will ever turn you down.”

“True,” Ron agreed, then began grinning. “With Ginny at Hogwarts she won’t be constantly in use, will she?”

Ginny’s face went a little pink as she took a bite of her pudding. Harry just smiled. “I suppose not,” he agreed affably. “That means you can write to your Mum more often, now doesn’t it?”

Ron coughed while his mother beamed.

The following Monday, Neville wrote to say that the greenhouse was completed and his Gran let him invite everyone over to see it.

Hermione had just returned from holiday on the continent, but her parents weren't prepared to take any more time off until Wednesday, when they were going to Diagon Alley for her school supplies. It took a bit of arranging by owl, but Hermione's parents agreed to come to the Leaky Cauldron a bit earlier than they planned and Flooing up to Lancashire to join the Weasleys. Harry remembered a grief-stricken Hermione reminiscing about how her parents always felt a bit excluded from her life in the magical world, so he was glad she was bringing them along on this visit. Neville's Gran was a bit forbidding, but the friendly Weasleys were exactly what the Grangers needed to see.

Harry realized that he wasn't the only one who found Neville's grandmother to be a bit intimidating. Molly fussed over his and Ron's clothes and absolutely forbade the twins from accompanying them. She didn't seem inclined to let Ginny come either until Harry pointed out that she'd likely be joining their study group at Hogwarts to get a head start on her own classes. She finally agreed after extracting a rather alarming oath from her daughter to be on her best behaviour.

Finally, after leaving detailed instructions with Percy on when to bring the twins to Gringotts, Molly threw a pinch of Floo powder into the fireplace and announced "Longbottom Manor" in a loud voice.

When Harry's turn came, he found himself skidding on his knees across the polished tiles that surrounded a massive fireplace. As he awkwardly climbed to his feet he resolved to re-hem his plain robes at the earliest opportunity. Then he looked around and fought the urge to whistle out loud.

The sitting room had a ceiling well over twelve feet high. The walls were lined with expensive-looking portraits in gilt frames and the furniture looked very old and very expensive. Although it was kept very neat, Harry nonetheless got an impression of brooding age from the elaborate fixtures. It reminded him uncomfortably of number twelve Grimmauld Place, minus the filth.

Thinking about that place reminded Harry of Sirius. He'd checked the Daily Prophet each day, but didn't see any announcements regarding his release or even getting a new hearing. His letter to Remus Lupin

had not been answered either. Harry took a deep breath and shook his head. He brushed a few wisps of ash from his robes and focused on their hosts.

Madam Longbottom was in her customary green robes, but Neville wore faded trousers with dirt permanently ground into the knees and a button-up shirt with the sleeves rolled up over his forearms. His round face was ruddy from the sun and even his hair seemed lighter in colour. He also appeared to have lost weight, even though his shoulders seemed a bit broader.

“Wow, Neville, you look good, mate,” Harry exclaimed.

His friend’s face became redder, seeming to be both pleased and embarrassed at the compliment. “I, er, well I kept up with my running and such.”

“That he has,” his Gran said in a regal voice. “He looks more like his father every day.”

Neville’s eyes looked like they wanted to pop completely out of his face.

The fireplace roared again, disgorging the Grangers into the sitting room. Hermione’s parents looked a little disoriented from spinning through the Floo network, with which Harry empathized. Ron remembered his manners and introduced Ginny, who curtsied shyly, while Hermione introduced her parents around.

While the adults settled down for a cup of tea, Neville led the rest out onto the grounds. Along the south wall of the main house was a huge glassed in greenhouse, easily the size of one of the Herbology classrooms at Hogwarts.

“Neville, this is amazing!” Hermione gushed. She was looking very tan as well. Her letters said her parents had taken her to Spain on a tour of the old castles there. Her dad was evidently a bit barmy about old historical sites and such. Of course, everything Hermione was learning about Wizarding history was turning a lot of his preconceived ideas inside out, but he seemed to enjoy debating with his daughter

on any topics that came up. Hermione came by her peculiarities honestly, Ron confirmed to Harry after reading her letter.

When he opened the door to let them in, Harry noticed the air inside was noticeably warmer than the air outside. Neville confirmed this. "Part of it's the glass letting the sunlight in, and part of it is some low-powered warming charms placed on the individual panes."

The tables inside were full of pots, sprouting an amazing variety of vegetation. "I can see why this took most of the summer to set up," Harry said. "This is really impressive."

Neville shrugged. "My Grand-uncle Algie gave me a lot of cuttings to get these started. He was nearly out of space anyway, and he's going to use this to expand his plantings while I'm off at school. I didn't think my Gran would go for something this big, but she got an owl from Professor Sprout at the end of term..." his voice trailed off and he seemed a little embarrassed.

"What did the professor say?" Hermione asked eagerly. As competitive as she was in most of her subjects, she was very supportive of Neville taking the lead in their Herbology revision. Some of it was probably due to their friend's shyness, but she was also more than aware of his genius with regards to plants.

"Well, Gran said... she said I was the best student she'd had in her greenhouse in ages, and it was a sheer crime that I wasn't one of her Hufflepuffs." Harry and Ron burst out laughing while Hermione clapped her hands with glee. Ginny smiled uncertainly, but joined in the congratulations. Harry wondered if Neville had done that well the first time around, but just didn't think they'd care. He felt ashamed that he didn't really know.

"Nev here," Harry said to Ginny, using the nickname that made his friend grin, "is the guy that helped us get outstanding marks in Herbology. If you're nice, he might let you borrow his first year notes." He turned to Neville. "Ginny is starting this year and will probably be joining our merry little band of blood-traitors."

"Harry!" Hermione scolded.

“Hermione, how would *certain people* near and dear to your heart describe a bunch of purebloods, half bloods, and muggleborns hanging out together?”

“I don’t want to define myself in Draco’s terminology,” she said primly.

“Ah, but what if it’s meant sarcastically?” Harry asked, wiggling his eyebrow.

Hermione let out a giggle and swatted him on the shoulder. “You are incorrigible! But it’s good to hear you laughing, Harry. ”

Harry shrugged. “Things are going well.” He pointed his finger at Ron, who was opening his mouth, “I’m staying at The Burrow now and I may never have to see another Dursley again. That’s a cause for celebration. I got to see my godfather and he knows I believe in him. And I’m just bloody happy to see all my friends again, yeah?”

Ron rolled his eyes but laughed along with everyone else. Hermione smiled at Ginny as the noise died down. “So you’re starting at Hogwarts this year?”

Ginny nodded, flushing a little.

“Good, if you want to study with us for other subjects, I have most of my notes from last year.”

Ginny smiled shyly. “I have Harry’s letters talking about the classes you took as well.”

Hermione gave Harry an odd, almost calculating look, and he decided to change the subject. “Neville, do you have any friends around here starting Hogwarts?”

Neville shook his head sadly. “There really aren’t any magical children around here, at least none near my age. Gran says the younger families tend to move to the Southlands, mostly looking for work.”

“Luna Lovegood should be starting this autumn,” Ginny said, “She’s a bit shy, but she’s nice.”

“Loony Lovegood?” Ron asked. “She’s a bit off if you ask- Ow!”

Ginny rather neatly interrupted him by stomping on her brother’s instep. “Ronald Bilius, if you can’t say something nice, I’ll render you incapable of saying anything. Don’t forget what happened to Percy.” Hermione looked up curiously at this but didn’t say anything.

Ron’s face went from red to white rather quickly. “She is kind of strange though,” he said defensively.

”That may be the case, but she did lose her mum a couple of years ago when a spell backfired on her,” Ginny said, scolding her brother.

Ron looked a bit ashamed and Harry sought a way to change the topic of conversation. He reached into his bag and brought out the Occlumency book. “Hey Nev, Hermione figured out what Snape was doing during potions class that was giving me a headache.”

“Really?” Neville asked with a grin. His friend’s antipathy toward the potions master had never lessened after their first class, when he concluded Snape to be a ‘sorry excuse for a wizard’. Neville was absent-mindedly moving a tray of pots with clippings stuck in the dirt and paused between tables. Harry couldn’t help but notice the muscles standing out on the boy’s forearms.

“I see you’ve been doing more than just running,” Harry said.

Neville blushed. “Well, I wanted to keep up. You know, on everything. But I didn’t have anyone here to spar with. So I tried to help as much as I could with the construction and did a lot of lifting. I also did a lot of katas, but I’m worried about my timing.”

“It’s all good, Nev. We’ll get it sorted out when we’re back at Hogwarts. Ginny’s barely started and she’s getting to be faster than me and Ron already.” Neville and Hermione looked with some surprise at the youngest Weasley, who promptly turned bright red.

Neville stowed the tray of pots and gave them a tour of the greenhouse. Harry couldn’t recall the properties of more than a third of the plants Neville pointed out. Hermione seemed to be doing a little better, but she was clearly impressed by the variety as well as the

condition of the plants. When they were done, Neville's face was glowing with pride. Even Ron, who found Herbology to be 'right boring at times, mate' was congratulating his friend.

"You know," Harry said, "Muggles who have a gift for growing plants are said to have a 'green thumb'. I think Neville has a 'green thumb' that runs all the way up to his shoulder."

Hermione laughed at this, while the others looked a little confused.

They settled down on a stone bench out on the grounds while Hermione explained to Neville the basics of Legilimency and Occlumency. Harry watched him pale at the thought of Professor Snape sifting through his memories. Neville had always been a very private person. He only talked about his parents after someone else brought it up, or the time Harry had walked in on them at Saint Mungo's. And Harry was, in all modesty, probably one of Neville's best friends. The idea of the hated potions master reviewing his memories of them must have been intolerable.

"This, this Occlumency will stop him?" Neville asked in a quavering voice.

"Once we get good enough at it," Hermione assured him, squeezing his hand.

Surprisingly enough, it was Ron who also reassured the boy. He slung his gangling arm across the stocky boy's shoulders. "I know how you feel, mate," he said seriously. "Thinking about that greasy git poking around in my head makes me want to spew."

"Ronald, that was a bit crude," Hermione objected.

"Accurate though," Harry said thoughtfully.

Neville chuckled in spite of himself. "It's going to drive him spare if he can't get into any of our minds, won't it?"

"More than likely. He's hated my guts since day one, at least partially for that reason," Harry agreed. "He probably will also treat you even worse at that point," he warned.



"It will be more than worth it," Neville said firmly. "It will be nice once we can talk to each other and know our conversations will remain private, won't it Harry?"

Harry nodded slowly. *Longbottom was never really slow on the uptake, was he?* he mused. "I'll leave this book with you until start of term. Ron and Ginny already know the meditation exercises they need to work on, as do the twins."

"You're helping *them* learn how to hide their thoughts? Snape *will* lose his mind then." Neville didn't look at all displeased by the prospect. "I'll get started on this right away."

"You may want to do the exercises in short sessions; otherwise you might get a headache. We found alternating them with the more physical practice was a good contrast," Harry advised.

"Yeah, but by the end of the day you'll be utterly knackered," Ron groused good-naturedly.

"A little hard work won't kill you," Hermione told him, but smiled when he started to object. Harry bit back a laugh. *Hermione teasing Ron about homework? Ron not blowing his stack? Would wonders never cease?*

Neville accepted the book from Harry, promising to return it back at Hogwarts, then led them back inside. Harry noticed Ginny hanging back a little as they walked across the well-manicured lawn.

When they arrived in the dining room, the Weasleys and the Grangers seemed to be getting along quite well with Madam Longbottom. They were all laughing at some story that Arthur Weasley had just told, apparently related to his job.

"Ah, back already?" Arthur said, rising to his feet. "Well, we do have some books to pick up. We do appreciate your hospitality, Augusta!"

Neville's Gran waved her hand in a shooing motion. "Oh, think nothing of it," she said, "Neville's been anxious to show off his new greenhouse since it was completed. He deserves some time in the limelight, as hard as he's worked." Harry wondered if she'd been

hitting the cooking sherry as he watched a pleased blush creep up Neville's neck. Where was the extremely severe woman who made Professor McGonagall look like an old softie?

Neville asked if he could accompany them to Diagon Alley to pick up a tonic for Trevor, his toad. Mrs. Longbottom opened her mouth, but paused, looking from her grandson's eager face to his friends and back. "Very well, Neville, but put a robe on and make sure you return by dinner time."

The party began Flooing to the Leaky Cauldron while Neville got changed. Harry watched Ginny out of the corner of his eye. She seemed unusually subdued, but he didn't want to say anything to her in front of the others. Harry knew she was very self-conscious about appearing immature in front of her family, admittedly with some good reason.

He followed her through the Floo and she grabbed his arm as he stumbled out, keeping him from tumbling to the mucky floor of the pub. He gave her a rueful smile, which she returned. He hoped that meant she was all right. Gringotts had owled him a couple of days ago about the ward upgrades, and Harry had one suggestion. He hoped Ginny and the others appreciated the surprise.

Neville was the last one through and they all marched through the archway into the alley proper. Their first stop was Gringotts, where Molly took a cart down to the Weasley vault and the Grangers exchanged some pound notes for galleons.

Harry had already withdrawn sufficient funds, and he remembered how uncomfortable it had been seeing the Weasley vault and then seeing his own. Percy and the twins were waiting for them in the lobby, the older brother looking quite put out.

At that point, everyone separated after receiving strict instructions from Mrs. Weasley to meet back at Flourish and Blotts in one hour. The twins left with Harry's favourite Quidditch announcer, Lee Jordan. Percy went off by himself. Molly led Ginny toward the second-hand robe shop down the road from Gringotts where Harry had purchased his clothes. Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Neville went to several shops together. At Quality Quidditch Supplies, Harry replaced one of his

shin-guards that had a badly frayed strap. It had been *reparo*-ed so many times that it had more magic holding it together than leather, and Oliver ordered him to get it replaced at the team's last practice. Hermione had been working on her parents about getting a familiar, but they hadn't consented yet. She did, however, closely examine the breeds of owl available at Eeylop's Owl Emporium, writing down a few notes on a piece of parchment she tucked into her pocket.

Neville picked up a tonic for Trevor at Magical Menagerie, while Ron looked at the creatures available. His Mum had slipped him a couple of sickles to find a replacement for Scabbers, but a lot of the pets were priced well out of his reach. Harry was wondering if he could do something when Ron asked the clerk something about kneazles.

"Well, yes, that's correct, they are good at that. We don't have any pure breeds though, and they are frightfully expensive. But we do have... well. Come on back with me. The poor dear isn't very attractive and we haven't gotten a single offer in the fortnight we've had him here..." her voice trailed off as she led Ron around a display of self-walking leashes.

Harry got a queer feeling as he worked his way through the aisles, detouring around Hogwarts students stocking up on pet treats. He heard voices dickering, one of which was Ron's.

"Done!" Ron said amiably. A moment later he came back around the corner, face to face with Harry, his arms full of a very disagreeable-looking ginger tom.

Harry felt the blood drain out of his face.

"The clerk says his name is Crookshanks. He's part-kneazle, so he's ruddy smart, and they're supposed to be good at sniffing out suspicious characters. If that bloody rat ever escapes and tries to come back, you'll eat him for breakfast, won't you?"

The cat cocked its mashed-in face up at its new owner as if to say "yeah, whatever". It did, however, begin purring like a mini with a broken muffler when Ron's fingers scratched the back of its neck.

"I didn't know you were a cat person, Ron," Harry said in what he knew had to be an odd tone.

"Well, I'm not going to be a rat person after what happened, am I now? Are you all right, Harry?"

Harry nodded and led Ron back to the others who were in front of the store now.

"Oh Ron, he's gorgeous, isn't he? What's his name?" Hermione gushed when she saw the cat. She immediately began scratching behind its ears and the bottle brush tail began switching back and forth.

"Clerk said his name was Crookshanks. Got a deal on him on account of him being so ugly. You're a great ugly ball of fur aren't you?" Ron said in an affectionately amused tone.

Crookshank's tail drooped and then shot upward to smack the side of Ron's head with surprising force. Hermione let out a snort, but Ron just smiled. "Told you he was a smart bugger."

When they made their way to Flourish and Blotts, there was a large crowd gathered in front of the store. With a mental groan, Harry remembered the book signing being conducted by that monumental fraud, Gilderoy Lockhart.

Harry's academic career had been marred by the appearance of some spectacularly bad Defence Against the Dark Arts professors, Remus Lupin being the sole exception. Technically, the Death Eater masquerading as Mad Eye Moody had done a decent job of preparing his students... but that whole resurrecting Voldemort and getting Cedric killed thing sort of ruined any chance of Harry giving Barty Crouch Jr. a good recommendation.

While Dolores Umbridge was undoubtedly the most loathsome of the lot, edging out Snape by a hair, none of them seemed to irritate and embarrass Harry quite as much as the grandstanding poseur he'd had his second year. He learned next to nothing that year and Harry wondered how many people died because a year's worth of preparation had been squandered on the man's raging egotism.

So Harry was moderately disgruntled as they settled into the line with the Weasleys and the Grangers. Hearing Molly and Hermione gush about the fraud didn't improve his mood. Harry had actually already purchased the Standard Book of Spells, Grade Two, last year; so all he needed to do now was just buy all seven of his books that Lockhart required his students to purchase.

Harry made an effort to stand behind some of the Weasleys, but when the photographer knocked Ron out of the way, Lockhart still picked Harry out of the crowd. "It can't be Harry Potter!" the man shouted.

When Lockhart dived forward and seized Harry's arm, Harry twisted his arm around the man's wrist, rotating his arm within Lockhart's grip until his fingers popped open.

"Har-ry," Lockhart said in a stage whisper. "You and I together are worth the front page!"

Harry tried to back into the crowd, but while they parted to make room for Lockhart, they closed behind Harry. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Mr. and Mrs. Weasley straining to push through the packed aisle. The pushy photographer shot another picture from behind Harry and to the side, no doubt so it would look like he was standing next to the smiling Lockhart. It probably also meant that Harry's scowl was mostly invisible as well.

"Ladies and gentlemen, what an extraordinary moment this is! It's a perfect opportunity for me to make an announcement I've been wanting to make for some time now!"

"When young Harry here stepped into Flourish and Blotts today, he only wanted to buy my autobiography – which I shall be happy to supply free of charge!" This got scattered applause from the crowd and a sneer of distaste from Harry. Gilderoy must have been a very accomplished liar, Harry decided, because the man seemed a bit disconcerted by the irritation and distaste Harry was displaying. *Had he never encountered someone who saw through his act?* Harry wondered. *He must have been awfully quick with the memory charms.*

“He, er, Harry had no idea he would soon be getting more than just my book, *Magical Me*. He and his schoolmates would soon be getting the real magical me! Yes, ladies and gentlemen, in September I will be taking up the post of Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry!”

He then handed Harry the entire collected works of Gilderoy Lockhart as the photographer took his picture again. That flash caught Harry’s eye again, giving him another blind spot and adding to his headache. That probably contributed to what happened next.

“So you’re giving me these? That’s fine for me I suppose, but what about all the other Hogwarts students who have to buy *seven* defence books this year instead of one? Are you that desperate to boost your sales?”

The crowd got suddenly quiet as Lockhart’s smile became a trifle forced. “Now run along Harry, I’m sure you have plenty of things you need to pick up.” He turned Harry around, and gave the boy, his arms full of books, a little push to get him moving down the aisle slowly opening in the crowd.

Harry purposefully let his feet tangle and fell heavily to the floor in front of Lockhart. He got his arms out from under the heavy books and let himself land on them, reflecting that he’d already gotten more use out of them this time around than he did the entire year previously.

Mrs. Weasley was scowling at Lockhart as she helped Harry to his feet. The photographer continued taking pictures, but Gilderoy’s smile had lost a bit of its lustre.

As they collected themselves and made their other purchases, Hermione nudged Harry. “That was very rude. Pratfalls again?” she whispered in a very disapproving tone.

“I’m not happy about having a fraud teaching defence this year.”

“Harry, you don’t know that! He could be very-“

“Hermione, I know. I’ve read some of his books before. Check the dates he gives for some of those anecdotes and construct a timeline. Some of his stories *overlap*. There’s no way he could have done everything he says he did. He’s a liar.”

She raised her eyebrows at that, but didn’t say any more. Others, however, were not as forbearing.

“I bet you loved that, didn’t you Potter?” Draco Malfoy snarled from behind him. “Famous Harry Potter, can’t even go to a bookshop without making the front page.”

“Leave him alone, he didn’t ask for any of that!” Ginny snapped, glaring. Harry suppressed a smile. The more some things changed, the more they stayed the same. If that was the case he knew what came next.

“Potter, you’ve got yourself a girlfriend!” Draco drawled in obvious delight.

Harry ignored Ginny’s blush. “Why Draco, are you jealous? Or maybe not...” he leered in a suggestive fashion. “That’s right, you must miss Crabbe and Goyle so very much... ruddy poofter.”

Draco’s face went scarlet and he suddenly reached into his robes.

“Just try it, Malfoy!” Ron hissed from beside the Slytherin’s left elbow. Neville glared at him as well.

“Now boys,” Arthur’s voice cut in. He was struggling through the crowd with Fred and George behind him. “Let’s get out of this madhouse.”

“Well, well, well – Arthur Weasley,” Lucius said in his mocking tone as he laid his hand on Draco’s shoulder. The pale boy straightened and sneered at Ron and Neville. Harry’s eyes locked onto the serpent-headed cane in the senior Malfoys’ hand. The blade hidden inside was poisoned, and once upon a time it had taken Arthur Weasley’s life before he could be evacuated to Saint Mungo’s. Harry heard books around him start rattling on the shelves and forced himself to take a deep breath.

“And young Harry Potter,” Lucius continued, “It’s very sad about that hearing. I could have taught you some... proper manners. Ones those Muggles evidently failed to beat into you when they had a chance.”

Mr. Weasley leapt forward, knocking Ginny’s cauldron to the ground and brushing Draco aside; his hand made a distinct crack as it connected with Lucius Malfoy’s jaw. Harry hooked his foot behind the Death Eater’s ankle as he staggered back and he fell heavily to the floor, pulling Arthur with him. Draco pulled out his wand, but Ron and Neville grabbed his arms in a flash. Lucius brought his knee up into Arthur’s side, but Harry’s attention was riveted to the man’s right hand as it fumbled with his cane. He threw himself down on top of the man’s arm, pinning it to the floor. He began prying the cane out of his fingers when he felt something seize the back of his robes and lift him into the air.

Hagrid set Harry down next to Molly, then grabbed Arthur and Lucius, one in each hand, separating them. “Break it up, this isn’t th’ place to be doin’ this.” Harry wondered if Hagrid had come to Diagon Alley to buy flesh-eating slug repellent this time as well.

Lucius glared at the groundskeeper until he let him go. A massive bruise was already beginning to show on the pale skin under his jaw. He picked up Ginny’s cauldron and thrust it at her. “Here girl,” he sneered, ignoring the glare she shot back at him. “Enjoy your second-hand books and Mudblood friends as long as you are able. It won’t be long for such disgraces to catch up to you.”

Harry heard a gasp from the Grangers and his hands shook from the effort it took to not pull out his wand. Evidently Hermione had told them what that word meant. Molly’s hand on his shoulder was the only thing keeping him from screaming at the filthy Death Eater to shut his mouth. When they finally stalked out, muttering threats the whole time, Harry wanted to sink to his knees.

Hagrid brushed Arthur off, muttering about the Malfoys under his breath. Eventually they made their way out of the store, but the mood of the day had been quite thoroughly poisoned. Harry hung back and helped Hermione explain the whole concept of blood-prejudice to her



shocked parents. Mr. Granger gave Harry a hard look as if blaming him for the situation he was explaining. Harry was a little fed up and scowled right back. "Look," he said, "some of the berks pushing that pureblood philosophy killed my parents. That's one of the reasons we have for hanging out together. Gryffindor House doesn't put up with that garbage. It's ugly, it's nasty, but most importantly it's not tolerated by decent folk." Mr. Granger nodded curtly as his wife squeezed his arm. Hermione smiled gratefully at Harry.

A much subdued group made their way back to the Leaky Cauldron. Molly had been quite upset at Arthur for 'public brawling', until her husband whispered something into her ear. She looked sharply at Harry for a moment, but said no more.

Harry pulled Hermione aside for a minute before they took the Floo back to their home and the Grangers went to where their car was parked on Charing Cross Road. "You might want to come by on Friday," he said quietly.

Hermione shook her head. "My father was really upset about what happened at Flourish and Blotts. I told him Mudblood was one of the worst... anyway. I'm afraid he didn't like some of what he saw today."

Harry sighed. "I suppose I can't blame him. If you can come by The Burrow, we're having the wards upgraded over the weekend. It should be fairly interesting to watch."

Hermione's eyes lit up. "Really? I've always wondered what was involved in that. Is it just spell work? Are there a lot of material components? Do they just weave the spells or are there significant arithmantic preparations first?"

Harry chuckled. "I have no idea. But if you want to find out, you might want to work on your Dad. You know, this would be easier if we could get your house hooked up to the Floo network."

"I know," Hermione sighed. "We do have a fireplace. I just have to convince them that it's safe. Today probably helped in that regard."

"I hope so," Harry agreed. "Owl me if you can come." When she nodded, Harry squeezed her hand and followed the last of the Weasleys through the fireplace.

While everyone was sorting themselves out in the kitchen, Harry volunteered to help Ginny carry her school things upstairs. As the only new student, she had the most things to purchase that day. Harry made a point of snagging the cauldron stuffed with books and quickly jogged up the stairs to the third landing.

Ginny's room was surprisingly feminine, with powder blue walls and a butter-yellow comforter on the bed. He quickly set the cauldron down next to the trunk at the foot of the bed and riffled through it. Sure enough, he found a thin book with a worn black cover, the sight of which chilled his blood. He flipped it open, and as soon as he saw 'T. M. Riddle' on the first page he slammed it shut again.

He held the diary close to his side as he exited Ginny's room and went up the stairs to the one he shared with Ron. He put the diary in his trunk, under his cauldron and some old socks. As he did that, his fingers brushed against the pistol he'd placed in there last week. *I ought to do something about this*, he mused before pulling it out and sticking it in his pocket.

He ran into Ginny on the stairs as she was bringing up the rest of her purchases. She thanked him for hauling her books and cauldron upstairs and he just smiled and nodded. When he reached the first floor, everyone was still talking excitedly and no one noticed him slip out the back door.

He took a deep breath of the fragrant evening air as he walked out to the orchard. The back corner of the grove was the farthest you could get from the main house and still be on the property. When he reached his destination, Harry made sure he was completely concealed by the trunk of a tree and pulled out the pistol. He held it carefully away from his body and pointed it at the ground about ten feet in front of him and pulled the trigger.

There was a sharp noise, not entirely unlike that of a Christmas cracker exploding. The gun jerked back in his hand, but nowhere near as much as Harry expected. The rich forest loam about three

yards in front of him jumped. Harry froze, listening for some sort of outcry. He didn't think the sound would carry that far, and if it did the Weasleys probably wouldn't even know what it was. He knew it didn't sound like the guns he'd heard used on television.

Smiling at the lack of reaction, he pulled the trigger again and again. With the magazine empty, the weapon was harmless. It was after almost a solid minute of firing that Harry paused. Looking down at the spent and ejected cartridges on the ground, Harry counted well over thirty rounds fired. There was no way the clip could hold that many rounds!

Then he recalled Arthur's words about cleaning charms and a conjuration enchantment in the handle... *Was this thing conjuring new bullets as they were fired? Is such a thing even possible?* He looked at the pistol in his hands with new respect. *This could prove more useful than I thought. I'll just have to keep a close eye on it.*

That evening, Harry noticed Ginny was still quiet as they set the table for dinner. He decided to ask her what was bothering her after they ate. The conversation around the dinner table was subdued as well. Harry got the impression Mrs. Weasley was still upset at her husband regarding the altercation at Flourish and Blotts.

"Well Harry," She said suddenly in a bright voice. "What do you think of your new Defence Against the Dark Arts professor?"

Harry carefully chewed and swallowed a mouthful of steak and kidney pie. "I think he's a photogenic fraud with good teeth," he replied.

Molly reared back like she'd been slapped and the twins snickered.

"You're in for it now, ickle Harrikins," one began.

"Mum fancies him a bit," the other finished.

"Shut it you two," Molly snapped. "Now Harry, you shouldn't be so quick to judge. I know it was a bit, er, much today."

“Actually, I read some of his books before, and his stories don’t add up very well. Either he’s incredibly sloppy with dates or he made up a lot of it.”

Molly blinked, frowning. “I see. Well, hopefully his classes should be all right.”

Harry shrugged. “If they aren’t, Hermione and I can put together some independent study topics to keep us all busy.”

Ron looked at him in utter horror.

Harry smirked at his friend. “And we know just the person to practice on, don’t we?”

Ron let out a bark of laughter but still looked uneasy. Harry noticed him palming some meat scraps off his plate and letting his hand drop out of sight. A loud purring erupted from under the table.

“Ron, I don’t know what possessed you to buy that cat. I thought maybe you’d get a nice trained rat, or perhaps –“

“No rats!” Ron snapped. “Er, sorry Mum. I just really don’t want to see another rat again. Besides, the clerk told me Crookshanks is a kneazle cross, so he’s dead smart and can sniff out suspicious types.” Harry noticed Ron’s eyes cut toward him as he said this.

“Yes, well, I suppose you did get a good deal,” Molly allowed. “But make sure you look after him.”

“I will Mum. He even stayed outside Flourish and Blotts when we went in, and waited for us to come out. He seems to understand what we say as well as a person.”

“Then I sincerely hope-“

“He doesn’t get offended-“

“When people wonder-“

“If he’s a very large cat,”

“Or a very small tiger.”

The twins snickered until a very cranky meow echoed from under the table and everyone else laughed out loud.

“I know who’s getting hairballs on their pillows,” Ginny said in a knowing voice, sending Harry into gales of laughter again.

They were gathering the dinner dishes when a plain brown owl arrived and landed on the half-cleared table looking expectantly at Harry. He unfolded the parchment curiously.

Dear Harry,

I apologize for not replying to your letter sooner, but I was temporarily indisposed. Your news was quite a shock. In the space of a single letter, I learned that a friend I mourned as a hero was both alive and a traitor. Another man who was once closer than a brother, but I had come to hate... he was innocent of all wrongdoing. I suppose, all things considered, I have come out of this experience with one more friend than I had going into it – and that is what I shall concentrate upon. I have petitioned to be allowed to see Sirius at the earliest possible opportunity, so I can apologize to his face for doubting him.

I would like to thank you, Harry, for giving me this chance to regain one of my oldest friendships. I was not aware that you had left your relatives’ care. At Dumbledore’s request, we were not to disrupt your cover. Now, however, if there is anything you wish to know about your parents or the past, I place myself entirely at your disposal.

Sincerely and with gratitude,

Remus J. Lupin

Harry smiled as a knot in his chest loosened a little. Ginny looked at him curiously, so he handed her the letter. She gave a slightly embarrassed smile, but took it delicately from his hand. Her grin widened as she read it, but she sniffed loudly as she handed it back to him. She blushed and quickly rubbed at her eyes. “That’s really nice, Harry!” she said quickly as she brushed past him and ran up the stairs.

In the sitting room, Harry helped Ron and the twins get settled into their Occlumency exercises. He waited as they began to meditate and clear their minds, but Ginny did not come back down the stairs. Once he was sure the three boys were settled, Harry got up and quietly left the room.

Ginny's door was closed, so he knocked lightly.

"Yes?" Ginny's voice was clear, but a little subdued.

"May I come in?" he asked, trying to ignore his own nervousness. He was rubbish at all this touchy-feely business. So why was he doing this to himself? His conscience reminded him of a girl who waited five years for him to notice her and he stopped complaining.

"Um, sure Harry," she replied, a little unevenly.

He opened the door and stepped inside, leaving it open behind him. Ginny was curled up at the head of her bed, looking somewhat miserable. She wasn't crying, but her eyes were still red.

"Ron and the twins are working on their Occlumency," he said slowly. He remained standing, but leaned his elbow on her dresser. "I'm not sure you're in any state to meditate, but I'd like to know what's bothering you."

"I, er, it's nothing," she said. "I'm just being stupid."

"I rather doubt that," Harry said seriously. "But something bothered you at Neville's, didn't it?"

Ginny's head snapped up and she momentarily got a trapped expression on her face. Harry just looked at her steadily, a faint smile on his face, but didn't push her at all. He just waited. Finally, Ginny sighed and shook her head. "You're impossible sometimes, you know that don't you?"

Harry smiled ruefully. "Well, I'm glad you put up with me then."

She actually smiled at that. It was small and fleeting, but genuine. "All right. I just never realized how close the four of you had gotten while

you were at Hogwarts. Seeing you together today, it was hard. You practically completed each others' sentences like the twins. I felt a little envious... and, and excluded. Like a fifth wheel on a cart. But I didn't want to say anything and spoil it for anyone."

Harry felt a bit like he'd been punched in the stomach. Ginny was talking like she sometimes wrote to him in letters... an older, more direct Ginny. This was the Ginny who'd always felt a little excluded by her brothers, even as she had no doubt of their love for her. The littlest. The youngest. The one left behind.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly. "I think we were all so happy to see each other that we were a bit thoughtless." He raised his hand as she started to object to his words. "Hear me out. It never has been, and never will be my intention to exclude you from anything. I firmly believe Hermione and Neville will be as much your friends as mine when you get to know them. Ron's known you longer than he's known me, Hermione, or Neville. I've known you longer, technically, than I've known anyone else at Hogwarts besides Hagrid. You're one of my best friends in the world."

She blinked, and her face had gone pink again. "D-do you really mean that, Harry?"

"Absolutely. And the next time you start feeling left out, I want you to say something to me. I won't think you're just a tag-along."

"Thank you," she whispered.

Harry frowned. "You look a bit tired, and I'm not sure you're in a mood to meditate. You want to turn in early?"

"I think I'll get some sleep. It's been a tiring day."

Harry smiled and stepped out of the room, closing the door behind him. He turned and found Molly Weasley standing on the landing, looking at him. He was extremely glad he'd left Ginny's door open, even if it did mean her mother heard every word of their conversation. The Weasley matriarch didn't say a word. She just patted Harry on the arm as she resumed her march up the stairs with an armful of fresh linens.

Harry felt a little jittery as he went down the stairs to test Ron and the twins' progress.

A/N

Biggest chapter to date. Some Ginny POV and moving on into CoS.

Comments:

Technically, there could be underage magic use happening at The Burrow. Since there are adult wizards in residence, it will be impossible for the Ministry to tell if it's being done. However, it is still illegal and the Weasleys don't want their children flouting the law. (Enchanting the car, technically, was legal for Arthur to do.) Now say someone detected magic being done at The Burrow when Arthur and Molly were known to be somewhere else – that could be used to discredit Arthur. I'm sure Lucius would love to exploit that. If the kids get out of the habit of restraining themselves during the summer, they would also be more likely to 'slip' in front of witnesses. There's also the fact that Percy would likely turn them in.

Harry doesn't slip and use magic all the time for one very important reason. He doesn't walk around with his wand in his hand all the time. It's usually on his person, but having to pull it out gives him time to remember not to use it. )

All Brit-picking is highly appreciated!

Regarding Sirius, telling his friends, and other important long-term issues. Since when has anything of importance in Harry Potter's life come easily?

As many deaths as he's witnessed, Harry can see Thestrals from a dozen miles away. Really.

In some ways it's just as accurate to say Harry is 11 as it is say he is 30. Maybe more so, given his arrested emotion development.

This Harry gets away with a lot of things because the people around him don't know what to expect. When you meet an unusually mature twelve year old who reads at a college level and performs advanced



magic beyond his year you think “magical prodigy” not “time traveler”. If he is moody or tends to have nightmares you think “abused child” or “aftereffects of parents’ murder” not “embittered veteran from the future”. grin

Comments on Earlier chapters:

McGonagall ‘turning’ on Snape:

While Minerva and Severus did have a semi-friendly professional rivalry, Snape’s complete loss of composure in front of first-year students, along with the revelation that he was routinely, for lack of a better word, mind-raping her students would severely damage her trust in him. I’m also not sure I would categorize “man arrested as a death eater and paroled on Albus Dumbledore’s say-so” as a well-established colleague. The man’s obvious inability to treat a student properly because of a grudge against his dead father should make any ‘careful and fair-minded” person question his continued presence on staff.

Harry acting too smart:

The only person to interact with Harry before the merger was Hagrid. While Rubeus is a nice guy with a huge heart, he is not the world’s most perceptive judge of human nature. If Harry is a bibliophilic prodigy (which he certainly acts like) why wouldn’t he want to read up on a new culture in which he is expected to play a role? “Harry is many things, but a genius he is not.” How would anyone know that? From the first day of class, he had established a persona for himself as an overachiever. Hermione is one of the few people who may realize otherwise, and that’s only because she works with him constantly and is hypercompetitive herself.

Thanks for reading!

-Matthew

## Chapter 18

Friday morning dawned bright and clear, and even the twins joined Harry, Ron, and Ginny on their morning run. With the five of them, the sparring was more interesting as well. By the time they were done, everyone was tired, lightly bruised, and starving for breakfast. Molly clucked her tongue as they filed into the kitchen. She stopped dead in her tracks and stared at her daughter.

"Ginny, what happened?" Molly asked with concern.

Ginny looked up, puzzled. She frowned and winced, touching her forehead. "Oh that. I, er, slipped a bit."

Ron snorted and began coughing. He stopped when his Mum glared at him. "I didn't do it!" he said, raising his hands.

"Well," Harry drawled. "It was either my chin or your shin, Ron."

"Ginevra," Molly said reprovingly. "What really happened?"

Ginny sighed. "Harry was trying to show me how to break out of an arm-lock. Ron was being a prat, saying I was too weak, so I decided to see what happened if I leapt backward into him instead of diving forward when I twisted loose."

"It wasn't a bad idea," Harry said, coming to her defence. "She knocked me and Ron both to the ground."

"Not a bad idea," Ginny repeated acerbically, "right up to the point where you both landed on me."

"Well, there is that, yes," Harry agreed with a grin.

Molly shook her head as she turned the bacon.

"Don't worry mum," Fred chimed in. (He had a large bruise under his left eye.)

"Look at it this way," George added. (He had a small scrape along the right side of his jaw.)

“If some bloke gets fresh-”

“ - with ickle Gin-gins-”

“- she’ll put him in the hospital wing-”

“-before we even get a chance to!”

“And don’t you forget it!” Ginny added, pausing to buff her nails on the front of her t-shirt. Harry was amused to hear her sparring verbally with the twins. He didn’t remember her ever putting them in their places before her fourth year. Or was it that she hadn’t felt comfortable doing so in front of him? Harry reminded himself that comparing her too much to the ‘old Ginny’ could be a bad thing.

*Don’t question, he told himself, just accept.*

Harry helped set the table as Molly turned the sausages over. She was funny about accepting too much help in the kitchen. Setting and clearing the table was one thing, but if he didn’t beat her to the kitchen, Harry usually wasn’t allowed to do much of the actual cooking.

*Of course there were exceptions to every rule,* he thought as a knock came at the door.

“I’ll watch these,” he volunteered as Molly turned toward the door. He hoped she didn’t look at the clock and spoil things.

Harry leaned back to watch her progress through the sitting room to the front door. Ron and the twins were still laughing and drinking pumpkin juice, but he noticed Ginny eying him curiously.

Molly opened the door a crack, then let out a gasp. Her sons looked up from the table as she threw the front door open. “Bill!” she cried happily.

Framed in the doorway was a lanky man with long red hair tied back in a pony tail. He wore a leather jacket over a black t-shirt and well-worn blue jeans. He could have passed for a motorcycle enthusiast if

it wasn't for the large fang that hung from his left ear, and the way his greenish leather boots glistened in the morning sunlight.

"Bill!" Ginny cried and ran from the kitchen, Ron and the twins a half-step behind. Harry snickered and turned the sausages before they scorched.

He was plating up the eggs and bacon when the gabble of excited voices slowly moved back toward the kitchen. From the sounds of it, Arthur and Percy were up as well.

As he finished the sausages, his ears picked his name out of the welter of voices in the hallway. "Where is Harry, anyway?"

"Oh Merlin," Molly gasped, "I left him with the fry-up half done."

"All done now," Harry called out as he took a stack of plates from the cabinet. Molly bustled into the kitchen a moment later and took the plates from his hands.

"You're just in time for breakfast, Bill. Would you like some eggs?"

"Already ate Mum. Actually, I'm on the clock right now, thanks to Mr. Potter here."

Harry raised his eyebrows as the other Weasleys look at him curiously. "How's that?" he asked.

Bill smiled and leaned against the edge of the door frame. "I'm told you asked for me specifically when they were setting up the team for today."

"Oh, yeah," Harry shrugged. "Well, Ron and Ginny were always going on about how good you were as a curse-breaker, so I figured you'd be able to make sure there weren't any flaws in the wards." Actually, his knowledge went a good bit further than that. With the destruction of Hogwarts, many of the pureblood families that allied with Voldemort sent their children to the Durmstrang Institute to complete their educations. With Karkaroff's death, Antonin Dolohov, one of the Death Eaters that escaped from Azkaban, became the new

headmaster. With that, any pretensions that the school was more than a death eater boot camp were dispelled.

In one of the more daring offensives of the second war against Voldemort, Bill Weasley led a group of Aurors and fighters from the shattered Order into the mountains where Durmstrang was said to be located. Not only did the grieving eldest son pierce the wide-area Confundus enchantment that masked the school's location, but he single-handedly dropped the centuries-old wards in the space of a night. The massive magical discharge took his life, but it also wrecked half the castle. The remaining raiders were able to raze the school, killing the instructors and the older students who resisted. Huge caches of dark artefacts, not to mention the tormented captives found in the dungeons, were sufficient grounds for the Norwegian Ministry to imprison the younger students as well.

Bill eyed Harry speculatively as Molly persuaded him to at least have a cup of tea. "I suppose I would be a candidate for inspecting the team's work, but they are probably going to resent someone as junior as me handling that."

"Now Bill, you are just being modest," Molly said as she made him sit down and set the cup and saucer in front of him. "You weren't Head Boy for nothing, you know!"

Bill gazed at his mum with amusement. "I don't think that's going to matter to Carpenter, Fitz-willis, Holmes, and their lads." He looked over at Harry and shook his head. "I don't know what you said to Goldfarb, but he pulled the best men off of jobs all across Europe for this little get-together. They'd be a little put out, if they weren't getting massive overtime pay."

Harry felt his face getting hot as Molly and Arthur gave him a startled look. "Well," he drawled, despite feeling horribly uncomfortable, "they should get over it after you find the first couple of flaws and make them re-do their work a few times."

Bill chuckled. "That's what I hope, anyway. I myself was a little put out when I got a message telling me to come back to England for a high-priority job. When I arrived in London, I thought it was a joke when I learned it was here!" His eyes were dancing merrily as they darted

between his parents and Harry's blushing face. Harry remembered that this was the eldest brother of the twins, after all. Bill drained his cup and stood abruptly. "I should get to work on an initial survey of the grounds before the rest of them arrive. That might buy me some slack with my elders. Have the boundaries changed at all, Dad?" When Arthur shook his head, Bill deposited his cup in the sink and walked out the back door, pulling a parchment and quill out of his jacket pocket.

Harry avoided Arthur and Molly's eyes until breakfast was over. One by one the Weasley boys finished and shot out the back door to watch their older brother work. Ginny hung back to help Harry with the dishes, but her mum shooed her out of the kitchen.

"Harry," Arthur said in a formal tone as soon as the door closed. "How extensive are these upgrades Bill is talking about?"

"I'm not really sure," Harry said evasively. "Goldfarb is in charge of the details."

Molly started to say something but subsided when her husband laid two fingers on her wrist. "Harry," he said quietly, "I'm familiar with some of the men Bill mention. Holmes and Fitz-willis did the new annex for the Ministry, as well as the spell-damage ward at Saint Mungo's. Joshua Carpenter is also reputed to be one of the best in the world. What did you tell Goldfarb to do?"

Harry sighed. "Technically, I can't tell him to do anything at all. I did advise him of the situation with Voldemort," he frowned as the Weasleys shuddered, "I asked him to make sure that the next time Voldemort comes for me, he'll come to Hogwarts because it'll be the easier target."

The Weasleys stared at each other. "Harry," Molly began, "Hogwarts is...well, it's..."

"I know, centuries old. And some of the best wizards and witches of the ages have added to the protections. But they were teachers and we have most of their notes, and Hogwarts is a public building. Their wards have to be a lot more flexible about some things, and they had

a much wider area to cover. It shouldn't take nearly as much effort to lock down a single residence."

"While that may be true, Harry, this still must be extremely, er, expensive," Arthur said uncomfortably. "Bill said they pulled in people from several ongoing jobs."

"Well... I think that's Goldfarb's way of paying me back," Harry said slowly. Then he scowled. "You know, before I talked to him, no one from the Ministry even bothered to tell the goblins that Voldemort was back? Even though he was probably behind that break-in at Gringotts last fall? That's almost criminal when you think about it. Maybe Goldfarb is being extra nice to me because I'm treating him better than the rest of the Wizarding society they serve."

Harry felt a bit of relief when an angry frown crossed his guardian's face. He didn't think Arthur knew about the Ministry's duplicity, but it was good to have it confirmed. "I'll ask at work about that," Mr. Weasley said. "I don't know many people in the non-human liaisons group, but someone should be able to tell me why we aren't sharing vital information like that."

Harry nodded. "I'd like to know as well. When Goldfarb owed me the details, I didn't know who those men were. I just suggested Bill be added because I heard he was a good curse-breaker and I figured he'd be well motivated to make sure The Burrow was as secure as possible." He smiled slyly. "I didn't think you'd mind a visit either."

Molly reached out and smoothed back his fringe. "You're such a thoughtful boy, Harry. I just wish this all wasn't necessary."

Harry shrugged. "In a perfect world, it wouldn't be. But from what he said, I don't think I've seen the last of Voldemort." He emphasized the last word and watched the Weasleys suppress their reaction a little better this time. "He mentioned something about a prophecy, but Professor Dumbledore evidently thinks I'm too young to know about it," he added sourly. If the Weasleys could get him to share that information earlier, it might make things easier. It might also make them want to kick him out the front door, but if that was the case better he know now than later.

He was interrupted in his musings when the kitchen fireplace roared and Hermione stepped out of the green Floo flames.

“Oh, Hermione, you’re just in time!” Molly cried. “Bill arrived to do the initial survey!” It took some arranging, but Hermione was able to take the Muggle Underground to the house of one of Molly’s school friends who was on the Floo network. While her parents were less than keen on the idea, Hermione sold them on the idea of her writing up her observations as an extra credit essay she would turn in to Professor Flitwick at start of term.

Harry took the opportunity to escape, and led Hermione out the back door. Not, of course, before Molly managed to hand her a fresh scone with butter.

“I’m definitely going to have to run later,” Hermione mumbled as she nibbled on the pastry. “Mrs. Langston wouldn’t let me go before I had some tea biscuits.”

Harry chuckled as they passed the garden. Up ahead, he could see a cluster of red-heads following Bill as he paced along the property line with his wand out. He stopped every few steps and appeared to write something down before resuming his walk.

Bill had evidently warned his siblings to be quiet while he worked, because Ron and the twins made shushing sounds when Hermione asked Bill a question about what he was surveying for. He gave her a quick glance and spouted out something that sounded extremely technical. Harry wasn’t even sure if it was English or not.

Hermione had evidently devoured one or more books on ward construction in the last two days, because she nodded and responded with something even more abstract. Bill looked up, a little startled, and nodded.

They continued talking as Bill resumed his walk around the perimeter. Harry was getting about one word in three. From the looks on everyone else’s faces, he was doing the best out of the lot. Harry wasn’t a complete slouch at Arithmancy; while he’d needed the portrait’s help with the temporal transit calculations, those equations were *hard*. On the other hand, he hadn’t had much formal instruction



in the subject, and he'd never really studied ward construction before. In the future, Hermione had usually taken care of such things when needed. After her death, he and Ron usually moved about too much to bother with them.

Speaking of which, Ron was staring at Hermione carrying on a highly technical conversation with Bill with a hint of awe in his expression. "She's bloody unreal, she is," he whispered, shaking his head.

When Hermione seemed to have satisfied her first burst of questions, Harry suggested they all work on their 'summer project'. Percy had already headed back to his room, muttering about an essay. Harry vaguely remembered something about him writing a lot of letters to Penelope Clearwater.

They settled under their usual tree in the orchard and tried to clear their minds and focus. When they'd had sufficient time, Harry began individually testing their defences with his Legilimency.

Unsurprisingly, Hermione had made as much progress as the twins, who admitted that they were also practicing a bit on their own. No doubt the opportunity to annoy Professor Snape in a way against which he could not retaliate was a strong motivator. Complaints about them learning Occlumency would lead to a few too many questions for the potions master to answer.

Ron's control was irregular. Sometimes his defences would be as good as Hermione's, but it seemed to flicker, like he couldn't maintain that focus for long. Ginny's developing shields seemed fine from a distance, but every time Harry pushed against them, they seemed to melt away. On the other hand, she did open her eyes and look at him each time this happened, so she was at least slightly aware of the intrusions.

After nearly an hour of this, everyone began stirring restlessly. Not wanting everyone to be cranky with headaches, Harry brought the practice session to a halt as Bill walked over.

"I'm not sure I want to know what can keep you lot quiet for that long," he said in a jocular tone.

“Got some bad news for you, Bill,” Ron said in a serious tone. “You remember Snape?”

Bill made a face. “Who could forget him? He tried to get me removed as Head Boy twice my last year.”

“You must have been thinking-“ Fred began.

“Bad thoughts about him,” George finished.

Bill frowned. “Probably on more than one occasion. Why is that important?”

“Well,” Ron said hesitantly, “Hermione is the one who figured it out.”

Hermione shot Ron a warm look before she went into what Harry privately called her ‘lecture mode’. “Well, it was really simple, once we isolated the facts. We know the Professor was doing something that didn’t require his wand, but seemed to have deleterious effects on people, especially Harry. When Professor Snape was particularly angry at him, Harry would get simply awful headaches. But the clincher was when he and Professor Dumbledore began displaying knowledge of things they simply couldn’t know -- things that were not written down or discussed around others; things they could only have known about by accessing our minds directly. After we knew what to look for, it was just a matter of time to find a book about Occlumency and how to use it to block Legilimency. Harry here appears to be a natural Occlumens, and though it’s frightfully rare, he thinks it may be related to how he got that curse scar.”

Bill blinked, looking down at the little girl who hadn’t even started her second year at Hogwarts. “And you worked that all out for yourselves?”

Ron frowned. “She isn’t the smartest witch in her year for nothing,” he objected.

Bill raised his hands, chuckling. “I don’t doubt it! I’m just a little surprised is all.” He looked thoughtful. “Now that I look back, Snape did seem awfully well informed. I just assumed he had all the Slytherins spying for him.”

"I wouldn't be surprised if he did that as well," Harry agreed.

Bill shook his head. "I don't envy you lot, still having to deal with him then."

"Worry not, o' brother of mine," Fred chuckled.

"Ickle Harrikins can be a right bastard," George continued.

"When he gets to pranking!"

"He just needs a bit-"

"Of proper motivation-"

"To raise a lot of hell."

Harry rolled his eyes as his friends laughed.

Bill smirked down at them. "This wouldn't have anything to do with that new Ridgeback of Charlie's, would it? He wouldn't discuss how he 'acquired it' in a letter... just that he wanted to get Ron something very nice for Christmas this year."

Ron's face turned red as his brother laughed.

"Thank you, Ron. You just saved me the bottle of fire-whiskey I was going to have to ambush Charlie with! Now, out with it!"

Harry, Ron and Hermione ended up telling Norbert's tale together. Each of them supplied a few details the others forgot. By the time they were done, Bill was almost helpless with laughter. He pointed a shaking finger at the twins. "And you two didn't have anything to do with that mess? Were you sick or something?"

"Sick with envy," Ginny said acidly. "First chance they got they were carrying tales to Mum." Harry was surprised that she was still mad about that. He hadn't realized she could carry a grudge this long.

"For which we have well and truly paid-"

"o' sister of ours! Got right shirty she did-"

“And was all about defending Harrikin’s honour-“

“barking our shins in the process.”

“Shut it, you two,” Harry snapped. Then he smiled. “Do you really want to spar with her next practice?”

The twins sighed and turned to their older brother. “See what we mean?” They said in unison.

“We ought to apply for Trelawney post-“ Fred sighed.

“Seeing as we predicted he’d become a Weasley-“ George continued.

“Back in the Spring.”

“What are you two nattering on about?” Ron asked.

“Ask Harrikins about our talk-“

“On straying mums-“

“And black-haired Weasleys!”

At this point Ginny had her wand in her hand and stared at her twin brothers, tapping her foot. “I could hex you and get into trouble. Or take a page from your book and let Mum know so she could do it for me.”

She was saved from such a difficult decision by a shout from the house. As they walked over, they could see a large flatbed lorry was parked in front of The Burrow. Piled on the back were greyish building stones. They might have looked like cinder blocks from a distance, but for the glossy finish on them and the lack of hollow spaces.

“Why on earth are they using a Muggle vehicle?” Ron asked.

“I should think it would be obvious,” Hermione began, but stopped when Harry glared at her. “I’m sorry,” she said to Ron, “that was a bit snippy, wasn’t it? What I mean to say is that they seem to have a lot of blocks to move, so for really heavy loads Muggle transportation may be the best way to get it delivered.”

“What do you need all those for?” George asked.

“Well, for all the wards and spells we need to anchor, we’re erecting some small outbuildings on the corners of the property,” Bill said in a formal voice. Harry noticed how his posture straightened and his eyes became more direct as the eldest Weasley brother talked about his vocation. “With properly-defended ward stones in place, you can greatly increase the power of the enchantments, making the person in my position’s job much harder. It’s also handier for more... active countermeasures.”

“Active countermeasures?” Hermione asked intently.

Bill stopped walking and turned towards them. “Things designed to kill intruders. I’ve looked over the general plans for this set-up and I want you all to understand something. These are not for playing with. Don’t try to bring any of your friends here unannounced for a joke. This is deadly serious stuff. I’m not sure what Goldfarb told Carpenter when he asked him to draw these plans up, but...”

“I do,” Harry said quietly. “He wanted any survivors of an attack on The Burrow to have nightmares about it for the rest of their lives.” He privately agreed with Bill, he wanted his friends to take the wards very seriously.

Harry could feel his friends’ eyes on him, but Bill just let out a short bark of laughter. “That sounds about right. Goblins are fair creatures, but vindictive bastards when crossed. Anyway, the point is, be careful with this, all right?” Everyone nodded and Bill led them back to the house.

Over a dozen wizards and witches arrived with the truck. Bill was a good bit younger than the rest of them, and the three men in charge were noticeably cool toward him. Bill introduced himself politely and handed them his survey notes. The atmosphere thawed as they pored over his map and notations, asking questions here and there.

At one point, the eldest wizard gestured at the children and murmured something to Bill. Bill answered him in a clear voice. “Oh, I wouldn’t worry about them, Mr. Holmes, I talked to them and they know to stay out from under foot. Most of them live here, but they all

attend Hogwarts, and find this process very interesting. One or two of them are even going to do an essay about this for start of term. And that black haired lad in the middle? Well, his executor is paying for all of this."

Harry felt his face flush, but there were no further questions about them watching the workers. Small squares of ground were cleared off and levelled at each corner of the property. Building blocks, which he could see were also lightly engraved with strange runes, were levitated into place. Once they were aligned, another charm made them fuse together. The small huts were constructed without doors or windows, but in the centre of each a large black stone was placed on the floor. The huts were left roof-less, but Harry noticed that four large stone platforms, also engraved with runes, were still stacked on the truck.

Then the older wizards joined in and the air seemed to come alive with spells. They cast almost continuously until the sun touched the western horizon. At that point, Molly, who'd been pressing sandwiches on the crew all day, practically dragged the crew leaders to the back of the house near the garden. Her children had been drafted, in shifts, to help set up the extra tables and chairs and prepare a huge meal for their visitors. The crusty old wizards, Carpenter, Holmes, and Fitz-willis, seemed a bit taken aback by this, but soon gave in and sat down, along with the younger workers.

Molly seemed to be in her element, Harry reflected, bustling happily as she fed well over a score of people. The crew leaders definitely seemed to have shed their resentment, and praised Bill's work on the survey, much to Molly and Arthur's delight and Bill's embarrassment. Finally, the workers, full and sleepy, Apparated away. Bill, of course, stayed over, sleeping in Percy's room.

Hermione also stayed over that night, sleeping on a day bed in Ginny's room. She talked everyone into another Occlumency practice after the warding crew left. As they settled down in the sitting room, Arthur and Molly looked from one silent child to the next, unable to hide their smiles. *I bet they are wishing all their children had studied Occlumency*, Harry reflected, amused. *It definitely keeps the noise down, doesn't it?*

He tested everyone's defences again, with roughly the same results. Then he felt a small tickle in the back of his mind. He glanced over at Hermione, whose eyes were open. The instant they made eye contact, the tickle became much more pronounced. Harry closed his eyes and reinforced his shields until the tickle disappeared. *Trust Hermione to go for the 'extra credit' and try to learn Legilimency as well.*

That night, Harry dreamt of bringing down the wards around Malfoy Manor, the night Ron avenged his father. Surprisingly, he didn't dwell on Tonks' agonizing death, or the slaughtered death eaters. Instead, he just fixated on the incredible light show as the Ministry curse breakers slowly peeled away the ancient house's defences.

Harry awoke before the rest of the house, but he'd got more sleep than usual so he couldn't complain. He started breakfast until Molly showed up and booted him out of the kitchen with a smile and a brief hug. Ron and the others were beginning to stir, so Harry felt no compunctions about waking them for the morning run. Hermione joined them as well, wearing the track suit her parents bought her.

Harry led this time, making sure their steps stayed well within the ward boundaries. He'd stepped up the pace this time, and was gratified that no one seemed particularly winded when they reached the end. After twenty minutes of katas to warm up, they paired off again for sparring. Ginny partnered with Hermione, and Harry noticed they'd adopted very different styles. Hermione drew mainly on Aikido, and tried to immobilize or otherwise neutralize her opponent. Ginny was working toward a more fluid and acrobatic style using her speed and a lot of kicks. Every so often, Hermione would catch Ginny's arm or leg and force her to the ground using a joint lock. As Ginny continued to work with her, she became more selective in her attacks and careful with her timing. Soon, their sparring became rather one-sided, with Ginny able to score and Hermione becoming increasingly frustrated.

"Hermione, you may want to switch tactics," Harry suggested carefully.

"But I'm good at this!" She insisted, almost in tears. Ginny hesitated, becoming aware of the other girls' turmoil.

"You are," Harry agreed. "But different situations call for different tactics, right? Ginny's very fast, and I would never try to catch her like that. Unless she badly overextends herself she'd be almost impossible to hold on to. But you can attack her as well, and a few punches or kicks will keep her off balance and not let her set up like she has been."

Hermione nodded thoughtfully and they began sparring again. The older girl was hesitant at first, but when Ginny went for a high kick, Hermione ducked down and swept her supporting leg, tumbling the red-head to the grass. Hermione looked horrified for a second, but Ginny just bounced back to her feet with a smile "Good one, yeah?"

Ron was looking bored watching the twins spar. Matching up the two of them was almost always an exercise in futility, so Harry split them up with him fighting Fred while Ron partnered with George.

Half an hour later a tired and sore sextet staggered into the kitchen. Bill was already eating breakfast, and eyed them curiously as Molly made them sit down.

"Quidditch conditioning?" he asked curiously.

Hermione looked offended, but Harry answered first. "The Slytherins have really been acting up last year, so we've been studying some Muggle martial arts."

Bill frowned. "Sounds like Hogwarts really been going downhill since I left."

"I'll say it has-" Fred began.

"Utter rubbish," Percy interrupted. "There wouldn't be any problems if you lot weren't so keen to pick fights and start trouble with people." It seemed that the older brother was only seen at meal times anymore.

"Do I know you?" George asked.

"He looks vaguely familiar," Fred admitted, looking curiously at Percy, who was slowly turning red.



“Leave him alone you two,” Mrs. Weasley scolded. “Just because some people take their studies seriously isn’t a reason to badger them about it.”

“I don’t know about the year before this last one,” Ron said, changing the subject “but it’s been a right pain with Malfoy and his little pack of snakes.”

“Lucius Malfoy’s son?” Bill asked, looking at his mother.

“Yes,” Harry confirmed, “and that apple didn’t fall far from the tree.”

Percy opened his mouth to say something, but stopped.

Harry looked around and noticed that Arthur wasn’t there. A glance at the family clock revealed he was at work. The poor man was working on a Saturday, again.

Bill went out to meet the work crews when they arrived and they resumed with a will. It went pretty smoothly until around mid-morning. Bill was speaking to one of the junior team members about something. Harry edged closer as he noticed him gesturing toward the Southern border of the property. The discussion continued, with Bill starting to frown as the ward-builder’s face grew red.

Finally, Bill threw up his hands and walked toward the two-lane path that led to the village. As soon as he left the property, he turned and walked along the boundary until he was standing about twenty feet from the Southern wards. He pulled out his wand and began chanting and making some very precise gestures, almost as if he was unravelling an invisible ball of yarn. After a few minutes, a tracery of multi-coloured glowing lines appeared, forming a delicate grid. One of the smaller lines began to bend suddenly and then a whole section of the grid began to glow with an unearthly radiance. Harry had to shield his eyes as the glow became even brighter, until it disappeared with a loud crack and the smell of ozone.

Bill stuck his wand in his pocket and carefully walked across the boundary. His long hair stirred a little as he passed over the invisible line, but nothing else happened. Harry couldn’t resist eavesdropping a bit as the crew leaders bustled over to the collapsed section.

“What th’ bleedin’ hell d’ ye think yer doin’?” Holmes thundered.

Bill glanced at him coolly. “No one believed me when I told them the anti-apparition field was too close to the border. The geo-magical density is a good bit lower there, so once I overloaded that, it shorted into the other fields initiating a cascading failure.”

The while-haired old wizard scowled, but Carpenter, a middle-aged man with sharp features and a goatee chuckled. “He’s got you there, old boy. That section was completed and fixed. If he was wrong, he shouldn’t have been able to budge it. Seems the lads got a bit sloppy there.” He clapped his hands together. “All right you lot, let’s do it again, and pay some attention to the bloody margins this time, shall we?” He turned toward Bill and smiled. “Good catch, Weasley!”

Bill ducked his head modestly and smiled. Harry felt a little smug himself.

There were no further mishaps, and they finished sealing the property by early afternoon. The roofs were placed on the four block houses and fixed into place. True to form, Mrs. Weasley pressed a huge package of sandwiches on the departing crew as the lorry’s engine grumbled and finally started. All three crew leaders shook Bill’s hand before leaving and thanked Mrs. Weasley for her hospitality.

After they left, Bill announced that he didn’t have to report back to Gringotts until evening. He smiled at his brothers and pulled a magically-shrunk broom from his overnight bag and cancelled the shrinking charm. Within moments the garden was empty of children.

Hermione wasn’t scheduled to Floo back and meet her mother until the evening, so she followed them down to the orchard to watch the game. Harry, however, had other ideas.

“You can take a turn or two playing,” he assured her. “They’ve got plenty of brooms in the shed.”

“That’s all right Harry,” she said quickly. “I’m not very comfortable on a broom anyway.”

“All the better reason to practice,” he countered smoothly. “You never know when it might be useful to know how to fly well.” He tried not to think of her broken and battered body after she’d been shot down. The three of them were fleeing an ambush near Birmingham when it happened. Death Eaters were all over the place, and with the dementors on the ground they used some school brooms salvaged from Hogwarts until they could reach the edge of the anti-apparition field. Unfortunately, Hermione had never been a confident or comfortable flyer. With her slower pace and straight course, she must have been an easy target. One moment she was flying stiffly, holding onto the broom for dear life. The next a cutting hex had opened up her left side almost to her lung. Ron’s levitation charm caught her before she hit the ground, but not before she struck a tree trunk with a dull crunch. Harry went mad with the simple healing charms Hermione had taught them while Ron cradled her in his arms and tried to stop her from choking on her own blood. They barely managed to get her stabilized before she bled out. It was two weeks, even with magic, before she could breathe easily. It was a month before she had full use of her left arm again. After that she worked with Ron every evening they could until she was nearly as adept flying on a broom as he was.

Hermione gave him an odd look, prompting Harry to re-check his Occlumency shields. “If you think it’s really important,” she said hesitantly.

Harry shrugged. “It could be,” he said. “Do you know how to swim?”

Hermione nodded. “Same thing, really, isn’t it?”

He smiled at his friend. “A just-in-case thing, yeah?”

Bill, over the twins’ protests, proposed a three on four game, with himself and the twins against Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Ginny, who he was surprised to learn actually knew how to fly. The extra person for the younger team was supposed to offset the older brothers’ experience. Hermione stuck near the goals with Ron, who talked to her steadily from the minute her feet left the ground. Even if she was less than enthusiastic, her presence blocked one of the goals completely. Harry concentrated on flying interference for Ginny so

she could score... which she did with great vigour. After a few goals the elder Weasleys held a quick conference. They then concentrated on keeping the Quaffle away from her as much as possible.

There was nothing else for Harry to do but call a quick time out and swap brooms with Ginny. On the Nimbus 2000, she was unstoppable and things quickly devolved after that. They eventually ended up in an aerial game of tag. Hermione even joined in. When chased, she would duck down into the trees to make faster pursuers slow down or eat bark.

By dinner time, everyone was thoroughly winded and hoarse from shouting. As they dragged themselves back to the house, Bill couldn't stop raving at what a great flier Ginny had become. She cuffed at his hand when he playfully mussed her hair, but the smile on her face made Harry's chest hurt.

After dinner there were some tearful goodbyes as Bill prepared to leave. He shook Harry's hand last and mouthed 'I'll be in touch', which was a little unnerving. Mr. Weasley got home half-way through dinner. He was happy to see his eldest son before he left, but he seemed a little distracted as Molly fixed a plate for him.

After Bill walked to the spot near the front porch marked as safe for apparition and disappeared with a soft pop, Arthur laid his hand on Harry's shoulder and whispered that they needed to talk. After Hermione left, Molly rather neatly manoeuvred her children upstairs or into the sitting room. After she closed the kitchen doors, she and her husband sat down with Harry at their scrubbed wood table.

Harry felt his throat tighten as they settled down for a talk. Arthur was nursing a cup of tea with a lot of sugar in it. He rubbed at his eyes and took a deep breath. "Harry, I'm sure you noticed that there hasn't been a single story in the Daily Prophet about Sirius or Pettigrew."

A burning coal seemed to have appeared in the pit of his stomach. "I've noticed. What happened?"

"When a couple of days passed with no word, I tried to contact Auror Shacklebolt about the case. It seems he was promoted and sent out of the country. He's on assignment with the Italian Ministry,

something about hunting down an illegal Animagus that burglarized one of their offices.”

“That’s... interesting,” Harry said slowly. “What did they do with Peter?” he asked.

“I’m told he’s being held in a secure facility, but they won’t confirm his location or his identity. Right now he’s just being held as an unregistered Animagus.”

“But if they make him transform, they can see who he is,” Harry objected.

“That’s true, but he’s aged a lot, spending more than a decade as a rat. The ministry seems... well, reluctant to confirm him as Pettigrew.” Arthur scrubbed wearily at his face. “I would have thought once he was in custody they’d be willing to admit their error with the true culprit already in hand. I think there may be something else going on.”

Harry narrowed his eyes. “What makes you say that?”

“I tried to arrange another visit to Azkaban for Monday, since that’s the last day before you head back to Hogwarts. The warden has been replaced, and a moratorium on all prison visits has been enacted.”

Harry inhaled rapidly and gripped the edge of the table. This was happening a little too fast. “This can’t all be a coincidence,” he growled.

“No, I think not. Someone with a lot of clout in the Ministry does not want Sirius to be freed. This has to go beyond simple embarrassment over imprisoning him without a trial.”

Harry scowled and rubbed at his forehead. He had a headache that was growing worse by the minute. “I think I need to write a couple of letters,” he said slowly. “Remus Lupin should be told. He might have some ideas as well.”

“If I find out anything else after you leave, we will owl you immediately,” Arthur vowed.

Harry frowned at his guardian. "Is this going to cause you problems at work? If whoever is behind this has enough influence, he could make things difficult for you."

"Harry, an innocent man is being held against his will in the worst place on earth. I didn't know him, but we fought on the same side during the war. We are not leaving him there."

Harry felt abruptly ashamed. "I'm sorry, that was out of line, wasn't it? If Lupin can make it, would it be all right if he visited tomorrow or Monday evening? He might have some idea who is orchestrating this."

"I think that would be a marvellous idea, Harry," Molly said happily. "You should try to get to know your parents' friends. Ask him over for dinner Monday, I'm making everyone's favourites since it's the last family dinner before you all go off to Hogwarts." She got a little teary-eyed at the end and sniffed as she smiled at Harry.

"T-thanks!" he stammered as he got up from his chair. He was a little awkward initiating the hug, but the bone-breaking embrace he received back more than made up for it.

He wrote a quick note for Remus, letting him know what was happening and inviting him to come to The Burrow for dinner. He included a password to use for the Floo, one of many improvements made to the household defences. Hedwig seemed eager to stretch her wings, and after the parchment was secured she was out of sight in less than a minute.

That night he dreamed he was watching Bellatrix as she stunned Sirius, making him fall through the Veil, over and over again. After he jerked awake with a gasp, he wondered if her cell in Azkaban was near that of her cousin.

Sunday was relatively normal. Arthur stayed home and enjoyed his last day off with his children before they left for Hogwarts. Between practicing and a little pick-up Quidditch, Harry made sure his summer assignments were completed and worked on a rough draft of a letter for one of his contacts. He hoped he wouldn't have to use it, but the previous night's conversation made it more than likely. After polishing

his words until his fingers cramped around the quill, Harry went outside for some fresh air. He was he forced himself to admit, a little nervous about meeting Remus Lupin. He was also worried about Sirius. He couldn't decide if his ignorance of the true situation was worse than feeling helpless. He couldn't recall signs of any conspiracy against Sirius in the original timeline. Was that only because once he was a fugitive he'd been beyond their hands?

Harry sighed and tried to clear his mind. Tying himself in knots wouldn't help anybody. The sun was bright, and the slight breeze carried the smell of flowers from the garden. He wandered through the neat rows, smiling when he saw the gnomes were already establishing themselves again. The small lake behind the garden was cobalt blue in the afternoon light. He frowned when he noticed Ginny sitting by herself on the bank.

"Gorgeous day isn't it?" he asked as he walked up behind her.

Ginny jumped and twisted around. He noticed her eyes were a little red, but other than that she seemed fine. She didn't say anything but nodded.

"Mind if I sit down?" Harry asked. When she shook her head he sat down a foot away from her.

They stared at the water shimmering beneath their feet. Harry glanced at her out of the corner of his eye. The slight breeze stirred her hair. Harry fought the urge to tuck a loose strand behind her ear. "You all right there?" he finally asked.

Ginny smiled, a bit ruefully. "No, I'm being rather stupid, really. I'm sort of -- unsettled. About going to Hogwarts, that is." She sighed. "If Ron sees me like this, I'll never hear the end of it."

"It's not stupid, Ginevra," Harry replied. She twitched when he used her real name. "You're leaving home and going to a new place for the first time. It would be abnormal if it didn't give you collywobbles. But you do know that most of the people in this house are going there with you, right?"

She nodded. "I know. It's just, you'll all be in different classes, and I'll be stuck with the first years."

"True," Harry agreed, "but you'll probably be in Gryffindor and we'll still be able to eat and revise together. Hermione's mad about schoolwork, you know."

"I think I picked up on that," Ginny said. She turned toward Harry. "Do you think Ron fancies her a bit?" she asked, her voice just above a whisper.

Harry blinked. "Maybe," he said, "but don't say anything – please! He'll deny it to the death and then do something stupid, and I have better things to do than listen to them bicker."

Ginny smiled, giggling. "You're a bit sharp for a boy, aren't you?"

Harry sighed. "I've had my stupid moments as well," he said.

*Like ignoring you for five years,* he thought morosely.

Ginny's laughter suddenly cut off. "I'm sorry," she said. Her hand moved hesitantly in his direction, then returned to her knee.

Harry shook his head. "Nothing you did," he assured her. "Anyway, you said you know this girl, Luna, that's going to be starting this year, right?" At her nod, he continued. "Do you get along with her?"

Ginny frowned. "She's nice and all, but she's been sort of, well, odd, since that accident with her Mum. She really only seems to be half paying attention to what goes on around her, so people have started calling her 'loony'. I think it's a bit mean, myself."

"She's probably just lonely," Harry agreed. "Maybe you'll be in classes with her. With any luck, she could end up sorted into the same house and you'll have a dorm-mate you already know."

Ginny visibly brightened at the thought. "That would be nice," she agreed.



"Of course," Harry continued, "if people do harass her, we'll have to be ready to deal with that."

"And if it happens in classes, I get first crack at them," she said, smiling mischievously.

"I'd almost pity the poor malefactors," he chuckled. He remembered Luna talking to him right after Sirius died. He wasn't sure what he would have done without her words about eventually being reunited with his godfather. Maybe what he'd set up would at least be a down payment on what he owed her.

"You know Harry," Ginny said, breaking through his reverie, "you're the only person I know who doesn't always tell me to stay out of the way. You're not always nattering on about how I can't take care of myself, or how something is too dangerous for me because I'm a girl, or because I'm the youngest. Why is that?"

Harry froze. What he wanted to say was locked behind his teeth. "Well, er, maybe because I got to know the real you?" he asked lamely.

"The real me?" she asked, clearly confused.

"Yeah, the Ginny that isn't a silly little girl. The Ginny that's willing to sneak out in the middle of the night to practice flying on her brothers' brooms. The Ginny that's nice enough to show a stranger how to get through the barrier at King's Cross. The Ginny that's brave enough to stand up to her brother, defending a girl who'd never hear about it, just because it's the right thing to do. That Ginny."

Ginny's face had grown redder and redder as he talked, but she didn't look away. When she spoke, it was in little more than a whisper. "Thank you, Harry."

"Don't thank me," he shrugged, "just telling the truth is all." He stood up and stretched. "I think I'll go see if I can help with dinner." He walked away, blinking rapidly.

Their last day at The Burrow started out normally. The twins joined in for both martial arts and Occlumency practice. Harry knew better than

to try and persuade them to work on their skills. That would only make them look for reasons not to. Instead he just offered it as an opportunity and let their own competitiveness drive them to it. It also didn't hurt that he let them know he wouldn't be sharing any of his future pranks with unprotected minds.

The last few weeks of training had had some noticeable physical effects. Harry lost the remainder of the stiffness he'd left Saint Mungo's with. With a sparring partner to work with, Ron was becoming difficult to block. If anything, Ginny was getting even faster.

Hedwig returned before noon with a note from Remus Lupin. He hadn't been allowed to see Sirius at all, and said he'd Floo over before six. Harry was a bit on edge waiting to see the man, so he was more than eager to help Ginny and Molly with the dinner preparations. Ron and his brothers were instructed, in no uncertain terms, to make sure their trunks were packed and ready for the trip to King's Cross in the morning.

Mrs. Weasley was just pulling an enormous roast from the oven when the fireplace roared with green flames and Arthur Weasley stepped out. Harry tried not to let any disappointment show on his face. He hadn't seen Remus since shortly after the destruction of Grimmauld Place.

"That smells wonderful, Molly," Arthur told his beaming wife. "Is our guest here yet?"

"Thank you, dear. He should be here any moment."

As if on cue, the flames flared up again and a tall man in shabby robes with light brown hair walked hesitantly out of the fireplace. His dark eyes looked tired and there were visible streaks of grey in his hair. His eyes darted around the unfamiliar room, but stopped dead when they locked onto Harry. His eyebrows stretched upward as he stared.

"Sirius said I looked just like my Dad," Harry said, smiling slightly.

"I'd say you do," Remus replied in an even voice. "If your eyes were hazel you could pass for him at that age." He shook his head as if to

clear it. "My apologies," he said, extending his hand toward Mr. Weasley, "Remus Lupin."

"Arthur Weasley."

"I understand you're Harry's legal guardian now?" At Arthur's nod he smiled. "I was a bit shocked when I saw the notice in the Prophet. I recalled that Lily detested her sister's family. I can't imagine why Harry was left there."

Mr. Weasley went very quiet and Mrs. Weasley began fussing with the silverware. Remus looked from them to Harry's stony expression and sought to immediately change the subject. "So, I understand you were able to see Sirius?"

"Dumbledore decided I should stay there," Harry said in a quiet voice. "If he had his way I imagine I'd still be there."

Remus stopped talking when Harry spoke, his mouth hanging slightly open. It was a disquieting sight for Harry. It reminded him uncomfortably of the way Remus' face had gone slack after Macnair stabbed the werewolf with a silver dagger. It took nearly a day for him to finally succumb to the silver poisoning. In the end, the best Harry or the remaining Order members could do was ease his pain. Harry sat with him until the end as the last of the Marauders occupied his final hours telling his best friend's son stories of their Hogwarts years. Harry didn't know if he was doing it more to dull the pain or in the hope that some of their history would outlive his end. Harry didn't really think it mattered. Tonks barely made it back before he passed. She kissed him goodbye and he quietly breathed his last. Harry held her as she cried on his shoulder like a broken-hearted child.

Harry shook his head and snapped out of his reverie when he realized that Molly was asking him something. "I'm sorry," he murmured.

"I was wondering if you and Arthur would like to show Mr. Lupin around. Dinner will be ready in about ten minutes."

Harry nodded dumbly and the three of them headed out the back door.

Harry was definitely calmer when they sat down to dinner. Molly had probably manufactured her need for the delay, but Harry was grateful. Arthur pointed out the garden and his beloved shed, but mostly they got to know their visitor, or know him again in Harry's case. Fortunately, Remus was just as kind and genial now as he was in Harry's thirteenth year. While both he and Arthur had fought in the first war against Voldemort, they had travelled in far different circles with Arthur already employed in the Ministry.

Still, they were able to catch up on mutual friends and get to know each other a little. Harry realized that Arthur was taking his role as guardian very seriously, and wanted to know more about Sirius and Remus before they got close to his fosterling. He supposed he might have taken offence, if the man's motives weren't so straightforward. It was surprising to Harry that some of the Weasleys didn't get sorted into Hufflepuff instead of Gryffindor.

The walk also gave Harry a chance to regain his emotional equilibrium. He hadn't anticipated zoning out like he did, but he supposed he shouldn't really be surprised. He was getting wound up about Sirius and he'd just reintroduced himself to someone he'd know quite well that died in front of him. No, no reason at all to go off his nut.

He wondered if his face still looked like a wet weekend when Ginny gave him a worried smile. He smiled back at her and reminded himself that things were diverging more and more from the timeline he knew previously -- and maybe that was a good thing.

Dinner, of course, was spectacular. He suppressed a smile when he saw Molly encouraging Remus to take thirds and fourths. After he and Ginny cleaned up the dishes, several of them sat around the table talking. Ginny and Ron lingered near the door until Harry caught their eyes and encouraged them to sit down. Molly eyed him questioningly, but Harry just nodded.

"Something is not right about this whole situation," Arthur said quietly. "No sooner do we capture Pettigrew than Azkaban gets a new warden who doesn't permit visits and the Auror in charge of the investigation gets reassigned."

“Do they think we’ll just forget about it and leave him there?” Remus asked, with a little heat.

“Maybe there is something else they are trying to accomplish first,” Harry mused.

“What could still be an issue eleven years later?” Arthur asked.

Remus stared off into space. “I’m going to check on some things,” he said distantly. “I don’t know if it will help or not.”

“We may have another option,” Harry said. “I wrote a letter to that reporter who came poking around here. Her name is Rita Skeeter, and she’s very hungry to do a story on the Boy Who Lived, but I imagine a nice juicy scandal would make her day as well.”

“Harry,” Molly said in a concerned voice, “I’m not sure that’s a good idea. I’ve read some of her articles and she seems to delight in saying simply horrible things about people.”

“You’re right,” he agreed. “She’s one nasty piece of work. But she knows if she crosses me I’ll never give her another story or interview again. I also asked Goldfarb if his business associates knew anything about her. It seems she is an unregistered Animagus, a rather unattractive beetle. If she doesn’t behave, that information could end up being an anonymous tip to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.”

The reactions around the table were mixed. Molly’s eyes bulged a little while Arthur had a pained expression. This was balanced out by Ginny’s feral grin and Ron’s muttered “Wicked!”

Remus, however, wore a bittersweet smile. “James would have been proud,” he said sadly. Molly looked scandalized at that.

“Well, whoever is keeping Sirius locked up is clearly circumventing the law,” Harry replied. “I think we should consider bending a few rules to get him out.”

Harry went upstairs and retrieved the rough draft of the letter to Rita he'd been working on. While the adults had some input on the wording, Ron and Ginny mainly supplied moral support.

Harry wasn't sure why he wanted them there, but he did know that he didn't want to be keeping secrets from his friends. He'd learned that lesson the hard way. Harry had secrets kept from him, 'for his own good', and he'd also shut his friends out 'for their own good'. In the end, those good intentions had led everyone straight to hell. *No one can really tell someone else what's good for them*, he mused. *I need to make my own decisions and let them make theirs. As soon as they all master Occlumency, no more bloody secrets.* The thought was both frightening and liberating. And if the twins became more than just business partners in this timeline, he'd have to include them as well.

It was getting late by the time they'd all given their input on the letter. Molly was still hesitant about using the venomous reporter, but agreed Rita could be a good back up if everything else failed. Then she shooed them off to bed after Remus departed with a promise to keep in touch by owl.

A/N:

This is the end of the summer, next chapter starts with the trip back to Hoggy Warty Hogwarts!

I'm not going to make a lot of excuses for the time between updates. Go get your flu shots, people!

General Review Comments:

Most people seemed to enjoy the Ginny retrospective because it filled in some blanks. I'm not Frank Herbert so I can't get away with switching Point Of View during conversations like I want to.

While wizarding children seem to mature emotionally a bit younger than muggles – almost like a throwback to Victorian England – I don't plan to write about twelve year olds snogging in broom closets. That said, remember that certain peoples' parents married right after graduating.

Summer moved a bit slower because Harry is going and making a LOT of changes now... some of which are going to have long term consequences.

Thanks go out to my wonderful Britpickers! (Note: I capitalize Mum and Dad because JKR does.)

I'm going to try and move most of the plot discussions to my yahoo group (viridiandreams, see my author profile for the link), as I have been warned that excessive author notes can get a story deleted.

Thanks for reading!

-Matthew

## Chapter 19

Feeling like they were actually doing something about Sirius gave Harry enough peace of mind for a good night's sleep. Though he woke as soon as Molly began knocking on doors, he was feeling refreshed. Bouncing out of bed, Harry grabbed a quick shower while the rest of the Weasleys were starting to stir. Remembering the chaos of the Weasley departure the first time around, Harry made a point of packing his trunk both rapidly and systematically. Truth be told, he'd never fully unpacked it. He got it locked and carried down to the back door while Ron was still in the bathroom.

Arthur was in the kitchen drinking a cup of tea and blinking owlishly. "Ah, Harry, you're already packed? That's a good lad."

"Didn't want to be underfoot when every else was getting ready," he explained. "Where do you want my trunk?"

"I'll take it out to the Anglia as soon as I finish this. Wait, you don't-" Mr. Weasley sighed as Harry headed out the door.

Harry noticed that his trunk was definitely a bit easier to manoeuvre this year, even with a few more books stowed inside. He wondered idly if he could afford one of those trunks like Mad-Eye Moody owned. If he kept picking up new books he might need one.

He left his trunk next to the boot and returned to The Burrow. He hadn't been inside the Ford Anglia since that nightmarish ride up from Surrey, and he wasn't looking forward to being inside it again.

Harry grabbed a piece of toast in the kitchen before heading upstairs. Arthur started to get up to check on the boys, but Harry volunteered to help. "After all," he said, "you've got to do the driving. I can just nod off in the back, yeah?" Mr. Weasley's grin was a bit sickly, and Harry wondered if he was less than fond of London traffic.

When Harry passed the twins' room, he noticed they were frantically throwing odds and ends into their trunks. Harry shuddered at the disorganized mess. He remembered them having to return to the house twice for forgotten items, nearly making them late. He saw the corner of the Filibuster Fireworks box peeking out from under the



discarded coverlet and pointed it out to George. Fred turned white when Harry asked him where his broom was. Harry shook his head as Fred ran down the stairs with no shirt on and only one shoe, hell bent for the broom shed.

Chuckling, Harry went up the next flight and knocked on Ginny's door. The door popped open a few inches and he saw Ginny's face above what looked like the neckline of a slip. "Mum, I'm awake, I just-" the door slammed shut with a squeal. "Harry, what are you doing out there?"

Harry felt his face burning, even though he'd done nothing wrong. "I knocked to see if you needed help with your trunk."

"Er, give me a moment."

"Sure, I'll go check on Ron," he said and beat a hasty retreat.

Harry went upstairs and helped Ron toss things into his trunk. He was still looking under his bed when Mrs. Weasley poked her head in the door. "Are you lot ready yet?"

"Almost," Harry said. "Just making sure we didn't leave anything."

"Please finish up, dears. We need to leave soon if we're going to make it to King's Cross in time for the express."

After finding his copy of *Flying with the Cannons* under the dresser, Ron latched his trunk shut and started lugging it down the stairs. Harry stopped at Ginny's landing when he noticed her door was open. He stuck his head inside. "Need a hand?" he asked.

"Just as soon as I get this closed," Ginny said as she folded her spare cloak and placed it in the corner of her neatly packed trunk. That done, she closed the lid and pulled the latches shut. "Sorry I snapped at you earlier."

"Don't worry about it," Harry said quickly. "You were just startled."

"I don't know why I thought you were Mum," she said with a laugh. "She never knocks."

“Be careful,” Harry said as he stepped forward and awkwardly lifted the trunk. “I might think you did that on purpose.”

“Prat,” she said cheerfully. “Let me help with that.”

“Nah,” Harry said. “It’s easier to balance by myself. It’s about time I got some good out of all those exercises anyway.”

Ginny snorted and followed him down the stairs. Harry brushed by Molly, who was fussing about Ron’s unkempt hair. They made it out to the Anglia before Harry’s arms even began to get tired. Arthur looked up quickly from the boot, but relaxed when he saw who was approaching. Harry helped him fit Ginny’s trunk into the magically-expanded boot after Arthur swore them to secrecy.

Soon they were ready to leave. The twins, Ron, and Harry were all in the back seat when Ginny sat down next to Harry. “I’d like to be able to look out the window, Mum. I’ve heard Muggles get carsick sometimes if they can’t, and I’ve never ridden long distances before.”

Molly nodded thoughtfully and sat in the front seat with her husband and a slightly disgruntled Percy.

For his part, Harry had never been carsick before, so he wasn’t worried. But when the doors closed and the engine started, he began to feel a little uncomfortable. Closed spaces usually didn’t bother him unduly, but even the magically-expanded passenger compartment began to feel a bit close.

As the Ford Anglia travelled down the path to the road, Harry began to feel his skin crawl. He wrinkled his nose as he got a faint whiff of a sickly smell. He gripped his knees, fingers digging into the fabric as his stomach tried to heave. He’d been a mess when Ron and the twins rescued him from Privet Drive, but surely the back seat had time to air out since then. As filthy as he’d been, he hadn’t left any visible stains on the upholstery.

Nonetheless, every breath he took had a stale reek to it. Every time he closed his eyes, he was back in that suffocating bedroom, waiting to die so the pain would end; trying to hold on for a rescue that might

not come. Wondering how long everyone had to live this time if he didn't stop Voldemort.

He struggled to keep his face impassive. The only thing that would make this worse would be the mortification of everyone realizing he was having some sort of stupid panic attack in the back of their car. Fortunately Ron was talking to the twins about Quidditch while Percy and Molly talked about his prefect duties and Ginny stared out the window, daydreaming. Harry took a deep breath and closed his eyes, ignoring the visions that appeared, unbidden and unwanted.

He almost flinched away when he felt a light touch on his forearm. Ginny had moved her hand, letting the heel of her hand rest against his skin. Harry tried to focus on that, rather than the smells or the memories, and he realized that her shoulder was pressing firmly against his upper arm. He let his eyes crack open and glanced at her sidelong.

She was facing forward, seemingly staring out the windshield. Every now and then her eyes would dart in his direction and her lips pursed. Harry sighed and tried to use Occlumency exercises to make himself relax, focusing on the feel of her arm pressing against his. He was more surprised than anything when they stopped at a traffic light and he realized he'd dozed off. After that, he was shaky but basically all right.

They arrived at King's Cross at quarter past ten, with plenty of time to board the Hogwarts Express. Harry lagged back as they sorted themselves out, and made a point of helping Ginny get her bulky trunk on the trolley.

"Thanks," he whispered as he wedged her trunk in on top of his.

She smiled, not even pretending ignorance. "I overheard Mum asking Dad if you'd be okay in there. They decided to let you be and see how it went. Like you'd let it show if you could possibly help it." Harry froze for an instant; surprised that he was so transparent to her. When he straightened up, she was faintly smirking.

Harry stood next to Ginny as they passed through the barrier in pairs. He didn't think Dobby would be up to his old tricks again, but he didn't

want to chance them getting separated. Too many things had changed for him to absolutely trust his foreknowledge anymore.

Nonetheless, they made it through without a problem. After a round of tearful goodbyes from Mrs. Weasley, they stowed their trunks aboard and found an empty compartment. Harry, Ron, and Ginny settled in, while the twins went looking for Lee Jordan and their Quidditch teammates and Percy left for the prefects' meeting. No sooner did they sit down than a slightly agitated Ron left to go find Hermione and Neville.

Harry sat down across from Ginny and closed his eyes, massaging his temples. His headache hadn't ever fully departed.

"All right, Harry?" Ginny's voice broke the silence.

He opened his eyes again. She had a concerned frown on her face. "Bit of a headache. Hopefully Malfoy will drop by soon and I can kip out for a bit."

"Malfoy?" she asked curiously.

"Yeah, little Draco seems to like checking up on his favourite Gryffindors on the express. Bit like a small terrier trying to mark his territory, I suppose."

Ginny giggled at the mental image. "I think Ron takes him a bit more seriously than you do, Harry."

Harry frowned. He never did find out what happened to Draco during the war. He'd disappeared off the map shortly after things went straight to hell. It wasn't even known if he'd been there for the Hogwarts Massacre or not. "Ron is right though. We are probably going to have to do something about him eventually. He hates you and Ron for being Weasleys, he hates Hermione for being Muggle-born, and he hates me for obvious reasons. Watch out for him, especially when the rest of us aren't around."

"Do you think I can't take care of myself?" Ginny asked. She didn't seem angry, yet, but her voice had a cool tone to it.

"More like Draco never starts anything unless he has you outnumbered or it's a sneak attack. I've told Ron, Hermione, and Neville the same thing."

Ginny nodded her head thoughtfully. The train whistle blew and the compartment jolted as the train began moving.

A few minutes later the compartment door opened and Ron entered. "Look what the cat brought in," he said jovially. Hermione rolled her eyes as she followed him through the door. Neville was next, smiling.

"You know," Harry said, "we ought to just plan on grabbing this last car every time we ride the Express. It'll make it easier for us to meet up, anyway."

"Of course, it also means Draco and the others will figure out where they can find us," Hermione reminded them.

"That's one of the benefits, Hermione," Ron chided her. He made sure the door was latched and let Crookshanks out of his carrier. The enormous orange cat glared at him before leaping into Ginny's lap. She began stroking his ears and a rumbling purr was audible throughout the compartment.

Harry suppressed a stab of jealousy towards the cat and smiled. "Any sign of our fan club?" he asked.

"Not yet," Ron said. "But then again they didn't start last year until we'd left the station. Probably didn't want someone's parents to see what they were up to."

"Good point," Harry agreed.

"Gran would love to catch Draco doing something illegal," Neville agreed. "We talked a lot, over the summer -- about things that, er, happened. She said it's a disgrace how his dad has so much influence at the Ministry. She said if it were fifty years ago, when she was younger and it was still legal, she'd call him out."

"You mean a duel?" Ron asked, surprised.

“That isn’t a civilized way of settling things,” Hermione said in a disapproving tone. “It doesn’t prove what’s right, it just shows who is the better duellist.”

“Maybe so,” Harry agreed, “but it’d be nice to keep certain peoples’ mouths from writing checks their bodies can’t cash.” Hermione looked thoughtful at that, but everyone else in the compartment was confused. Harry sighed and explained the Muggle figure of speech.

“You’re right, mate.” Ron said happily. “A good cursing or two would encourage polite behaviour.” He grinned. “Especially with all the curses Hermione has learned.”

Hermione rolled her eyes as they all laughed, but Harry noticed her cheeks grow a bit pink as well. Harry leaned back in his seat and felt the tension ebb out of him. Being with all of his friends again was like a tonic after the tension of the drive to King’s Cross. For a moment Harry wished this train ride could last forever, delaying their arrival at Hogwarts. For now, his friends were happy and safe, and that was all he could ask for. He didn’t even realize he was dozing as the murmur of conversation lulled him to sleep.

He dreamed he was in an underground chamber lined with serpentine statues. He was looking desperately for something he couldn’t find. Worse, he’d forgotten what he was searching for. He tried to raise his wand for light, but remembered he’d dropped it. Why had he done something stupid like that?

A loud bang yanked him out of his disturbing dream as the compartment door was thrown open. His hand was already digging into his sleeve for his wand as he opened his eyes. Ginny was standing in the doorway, looking dishevelled and angry. “Get your wands and follow me!” she hissed.

Harry leapt to his feet, his mind racing. She didn’t appear to be hurt, just furious.

“What is it?” Ron asked, his voice cracking.

"Stop wasting time and follow me," she snapped. Harry blinked and nodded quickly. He hadn't seen Ginny this angry before, even when she was talking about Percy carrying tales.

She took off down the corridor, Harry right on her heels. He heard footsteps behind him as the others hurried out of the compartment. Just past the lavatories, he saw a group of students bunched up in the aisle.

"I think the little freak is going to cry," a taunting voice called out. Harry recognized Draco Malfoy's sneer.

"I think you're right, Draco. What's the matter, Loony, going to have your father write a story about it in his newspaper? Not that anyone reads that tripe." As he got closer, he recognized Pansy's nasal twang. Looking over them, he could see that they'd surrounded a smaller girl with short blond hair and protuberant blue eyes.

"Ow! She kicked me, the little trog," Crabbe growled.

"We'll do worse if you don't let her go right effing now," Harry growled. He ignored the quiet hiss that he knew had to have come from Hermione. He had more pressing matters to worry about than how his language had deteriorated over the course of the war.

"Don't even think of ordering us around, half-blood. We don't take orders from blood traitors either," Draco snarled. Then he got a nasty smile. "I heard how the Weasels had to take you in, Potter. Are you so desperate you had to *buy* a family now? I hope they came cheap."

Harry ignored Ron's growl. As he responded, he focused his attention on the patterns of red and gold the light made in Ginny's hair. He didn't want to lose control and fire the first curse. "No, but I was touched by the bid your father made for me. Especially considering it came from a lying, murdering death eater who doesn't even have the balls to own up to his crimes. I guess that runs in the family too, huh?"

He looked back up as Draco's face went crimson. "*Frigidio!*" he snapped as a blue streak exploded from the end of his wand.

*“Protego!”* Harry called out as he extended his wand over Ginny’s shoulder. A shimmering glow appeared in front of them and the blue streak bounced off of it and slammed into the lavatory door. The metal door was beaded with condensation as a thick streak of frost appeared where the spell had struck.

*“Mucosa Volatis!”* Ginny’s wand sent a greenish beam into Crabbe’s face. He pressed both hands to his nose as his eyes widened in horror. He squealed as a gray-green winged form wriggled out from between his palms and began circling his head and clawing at his eyes. He let go of his nose to swipe at the tiny bat and three more burst from his nostrils.

While he was occupied, the girl he’d been holding onto was able to wriggle free and run toward the Gryffindors. Pansy made a grab at the girl’s robes but yanked her hand back when Hermione hit it with a stinging hex.

The other Slytherins pulled out their wands and Harry braced himself and reinforced his shield charm when someone began shouting. “Stop it right this instant. Wands away! I said stand down or everyone here will be serving detentions!” Percy’s face was almost as red as his hair. A Ravenclaw student with long brown hair and a Prefects badge on her robes was right on his heels as well.

Draco and his cronies reluctantly shoved their wands into their robes. Percy dispelled the hex on Crabbe, being quite careful not get any spattered bogeys on himself. With muttered threats and surly looks, the Slytherin students slowly turned and filed away past the prefects.

Harry did not release the shield charm until every wand was out of sight, much to Percy’s visible annoyance. He slid his wand into his sleeve, noting the glares Ginny and Ron were giving their brother. Hermione was patting the back of the blond girl, who Harry recognized as a much younger Luna Lovegood. Ron and Neville were up on their toes, trying to see over everyone.

Harry had always considered Percy to be moderately clever. Today there was little evidence of this as the Gryffindor prefect tore into his housemates.



"What did I tell you about starting trouble?" He hissed at Harry. "This kind of behaviour is not to be tolerated. Mum is not going to want to hear about you getting detention before we even arrive at Hogwarts."

"I'm sure you're just dying to tell her, too," Ginny said disdainfully before Harry could nudge her.

Percy turned toward his sister in surprise, but Ron's voice broke in. "While you're at it, you can try explaining why we had to stop them harassing a new student. Where were you ruddy prefects when that was happening?"

"It's been going on a while, too," Ginny said, "I heard them when I was in the lavatory and they tried to grab me when I came out."

Harry ground his teeth when he realized why her hair had been in such disarray when she opened the compartment door. He glared furiously at Percy now. *Where the hell were you when they were trying to hurt your sister?* He asked silently.

"Get back to your compartment!" Percy snarled. His face had gone the colour of bricks and the female prefect laid her hand on his arm, her expression questioning.

Harry spun on his heel and they all walked back to their berth, Luna sandwiched between Hermione and Ron. As soon as they were inside, Ron angrily slammed the door shut, making them all jump. "That worthless prat!" he snarled. "He barely says anything to the Slytherins, but he gets all over us about it!"

"I'm sure he just doesn't want to look like he's showing favouritism," Hermione said in a soothing tone. "He doesn't want people to think he's like Professor Snape."

"No, he was just dying to get Harry in trouble," Ginny disagreed, her face flushing, "especially with Mum."

Harry blinked. Ron glared at his sister, but didn't say anything. Luna sat silently on the bench between Hermione and Neville. She jumped when Neville cleared his throat. "Can someone explain what's going on?" Neville asked. "Slowly?"

“Percy’s just being a git,” Ron replied truculently. “He barely talked to anyone all summer.”

“He’s been especially unbearable this last month,” Ginny added. “And he’s even snarky to Harry.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Harry asked cautiously.

“Well, er, you’ve never pranked him, ever,” she said. “It’s one thing if he snarls at Ron, or the twins. They probably did something at some point to deserve it.”

Ron scowled and started to open his mouth, but shut it.

Harry looked back and forth between the two red-heads. “That’s not all of it, is it?” he asked slowly.

Ron looked at his sister again and sighed. “Well, when the twins and I were making plans to get you, Percy stumbled over us and got pretty shirty about it. He kept going on about how we needed to mind our own business, and how the Ministry would take care of it if there was a problem. If we did anything, we could get Dad in trouble at work, so we needed to butt out.”

“And when he turned out to be wrong?” Hermione asked softly.

“That’s it. He never said he was wrong,” Ron grouched. “He wouldn’t even talk about it.”

“Nothing harder to do than forgive someone for proving you wrong,” Harry muttered.

“So he sort of has it in for you, Harry?” Neville asked, sounding somewhat confused.

“Could be,” Harry agreed. He didn’t remember Percy being so hostile until after he’d gone to work for the Ministry. He wondered if it had something to do with him coming to The Burrow.

“He’s a prat to everyone, Harry,” Ron said.

“Ron, you saw him after we came back from Diagon Alley,” Ginny said, shaking her head. “He couldn’t have been waiting for more than five minutes, but he couldn’t wait to tell Mum and Dad.”

“Did anyone ask him if he had a problem with me coming to live at The Burrow?” Harry asked, his voice little more than a whisper.

“He didn’t say anything when Mum and Dad talked to us about it beforehand,” Ron said, frowning thoughtfully.

“That’s not quite the same thing though, is it?” Ginny mused.

“I think he also was disappointed because he wanted to look good for that person he was with,” the blond girl said as she picked at the seam of her sleeve.

*No one else knows that he was writing all those letters to Penelope Clearwater,* Harry thought with some amusement. “You may be right,” he said carefully, suppressing a grin. *Looks like Luna always had a talent for noticing things.*

Ron seemed a bit startled at the idea, but Ginny was just thoughtful. “By the way everyone, this is Luna Lovegood. Luna, this is Harry, Hermione, and Neville. Unfortunately, you’ve met Ron already.”

Harry ignored the squawk of outrage from his friend and nodded politely to the girl. She gave him a rather odd look before she turned toward the others. “I appreciate you stopping them,” she said distantly. “It was starting to get repetitive. I suppose I should be used to it by now though.”

“That’s tripe, Luna,” Ginny snapped. “You don’t have to put up with that, and you know it.”

Luna just shrugged and glanced at the window.

“I was hoping things would settle down over the summer,” Hermione grumbled. “But it seems like Draco and his friends are just taking up where they left off.”

Harry sighed. "Hermione, you've sat classes with that lot. You know how stupid they are. Those pureblood fanatics are going to hold onto their bigotry until they are dragged, kicking and screaming, into the twentieth century." He shrugged and smiled. "That being the case I'd rather we were doing the kicking and they were doing the screaming."

Ron let out a loud laugh, echoed by Neville. Ginny smiled warmly at Harry while Hermione sighed, though the corner of her mouth did curl upward.

Luna stared at Harry without blinking. "You must all be in Gryffindor," she said. It wasn't a question.

The rest of their journey passed in relative peace. Ron coaxed Hermione into a game of chess while Ginny and Luna talked and Neville leafed through a Herbology journal.

Harry dozed off again, but at least that weird dream didn't return. When he awoke, they were almost to Hogsmeade and a couple of chocolate frogs were sitting on his lap. He blinked at his friends in confusion, but no one would tell him who had purchased the treats for him. He shrugged and ate one as the train came to a halt.

Harry shrugged into his school robe as students began filing off the train. He and his friends clambered down the back steps and onto the platform. It only took a moment to spot Hagrid's head looming above the crowd.

"Firs' years, over here!" Hagrid boomed as some of the shorter students looked around in confusion. "Ever' one else, on ter th' carriages!" Gradually, the milling students began to sort themselves out.

"Alrigh', Harry?" the huge man called out as he spotted them approaching.

"Doing great, Hagrid," Harry said, smiling. "We have two new students here starting this term, Luna and Ginny."

"Well, I'll keep a close eye on 'em for ye, Harry," Hagrid replied, peering down at the girls. "I heard Arthur and Molly broke all th' rules

and had a lil' girl," he rumbled. "And I went ter Hogwarts wit' a Lovegood. Was that yer Dad?" he asked Luna.

The blond girl just cocked her head and peered up at the groundskeeper, but didn't answer.

"Well, no matter. I'll get them up ter th' Sortin' in half a mo'," he said, waving as Harry and the other second years made their way to the carriages. Harry was unsurprised that he could clearly see the thestrals harnessed to them. The four of them piled into the large carriage with a good bit of room left over. Soon they were moving up the road toward the Hogwarts gates.

The Great Hall was just as Harry remembered it. He made sure his Occlumency shields were up before he looked toward the high table. Professor Snape was sitting next to Gilderoy Lockhart. The latter was gaily chatting away, seemingly unaware that the potion master looked like he really wanted a vial of poison. Professor Dumbledore's eyes met Harry's for a moment, but the only reaction was a small nod. The absence of a Legilimency attempt was a hopeful sign, so Harry returned the nod.

When they sat down, Harry made sure they left a space between himself and Ron, as well as between Hermione and Neville. He waved hello to Seamus and Dean, but he doubtlessly appeared distracted to anyone who knew him. He didn't think the Sorting Hat would double-cross him, but beginnings are such delicate things.

Neville was quiet, but Hermione was obviously concerned as she stared across the table, her eyes flickering between Harry and Ron. Harry grunted and turned toward Ron. "It puts her anywhere else; I say we use it to start a bonfire."

Ron looked puzzled for just a split second, then a slow grin spread over his face and he nodded.

Hermione looked scandalized for a moment before she started laughing out loud. She smothered her mirth at a disapproving glare from Professor McGonagall, who was just getting up, apparently to fetch the first years to be sorted. Neville settled for a quiet grin.

Soon the new students were marched into the hall and Professor McGonagall paused while the Sorting Hat burst into song.

*The hall is lit with candles tall.*

*The year, it has turned.*

*The leaves are changing, soon to fall.*

*The students have returned.*

*New faces peer, full of fright.*

*How shall we sort you out?*

*Time to choose, get it right*

*I'll see smiles, nary a pout.*

*Fair Ravenclaw, a clever lot,*

*Have minds honed and sharp.*

*Those Slytherin have clever plots,*

*Tuned to ambition, played like a harp.*

*Oh Hufflepuff, steadfast and true*

*They never carp, hard workers all.*

*Gryffindor, the courageous few-*

*Against their foes, they never fall.*

*As a thinking cap, I am no fool.*

*I'll see your place, your proper nook.*

*The founder's helper, Godric's tool,*

*Put me on, I'll have a look.*

The assembled students burst into applause, even the Slytherins. Harry supposed they wanted to be polite or else they might not get any new students this term. As Professor McGonagall began calling out the names of the students to be sorted, Harry reflected that sitting here beat the heck out of getting battered to death by the Whomping Willow.

Of course there were a few snags, when Creevey, Colin, made a bee line for the empty seat next to Harry, he and Ron had to politely explain that they were saving it for Ron's little sister.

"Lovegood, Luna," McGonagall called out. The blond girl walked up to the stool in a very matter-of-fact manner and carefully placed the hat on her head. She sat there for over a minute before the hat said "Gryffindor" in a less than enthusiastic manner.

Ignoring the isolated muttering, Hermione waved the girl over to the seat next to her. Her enthusiasm was completely unfeigned, and Harry had to hide an overly proud smile.

Ginny was one of the last to be sorted, but the hat barely touched her hair before it announced "Gryffindor" in a loud voice. Harry joined in with her brothers and clapped until his hands were quite numb.

When the blushing red-head sat down between Harry and her brother, the Boy Who Lived let out a breath he wasn't aware he'd been holding. *That's another step done*, he thought. *We're all here together*. Hermione was whispering to Luna as the sorting concluded. Harry remembered his friend mentioning once that she hadn't had any real friends before she came to Hogwarts, and he wondered if she felt especially sorry for Luna after seeing her being picked on.

Dumbledore stood. "And so we begin another year at Hogwarts! But first, a few words before our meal. Autarchy, Diaspora, and Quizzical! Now let us eat!"

With that, the platters before them were filled with food and Harry's stomach let out a low growling noise. Ginny muffled a snort as Harry speared a slab of roast beef on his fork. Last year's feast had followed the rather lean portions at the Dursleys, so he hadn't been able to properly enjoy it. Harry frowned as he loaded up his plate.

Goldfarb's last letter indicated that Uncle Vernon had been sacked and charged with embezzlement by Grunnings. He was shed of his worthless relatives, and they were just beginning to pay for what they'd done. Still, his thoughts stumbled over them at odd moments, stirring up old bitterness.

Luna watched her neighbours load down their plates with food. "I read a story that the Hogwarts kitchens test out addictive food additives designed to make people overeat in restaurants. Looks like that one is certainly true."

Neville, the only person that didn't have his mouth full, laughed. "No, we work it off every morning. Harry's got us all doing martial arts and fitness training. I used to be dead clumsy and now I only trip half as often."

"And then only when you walk by the Slytherins, mate," Ron said after swallowing.

"You want to join us?" Harry asked carefully. Now that he saw an opening, he hoped to seal the deal. "Ginny has started working with us as well, so you won't be the only new girl."

Luna stared at Harry long enough to make him wonder if he'd said something wrong. Finally, she nodded. "I'd like that," she said and began eating.

The feast proceeded without further incident. By the time dessert was served, Harry was definitely feeling groggy.

Once the dessert was cleared away, Dumbledore stood and the Great Hall immediately quieted down. "Very good," he said cheerfully, his voice nonetheless filling the hall. "Now that we are all replete from this excellent dinner, I have one more announcement. Joining us to fill the position of Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher is the extremely well known Gilderoy Lockhart."

There was scattered applause, mostly from the witches, following that announcement. With a grin that displayed an inordinate number of teeth, the man gave a jaunty wave in response. Next to him, Professor Snape grimaced, his upper lip showing a definite curl.



“I’m sure you will all show him a very warm welcome,” Dumbledore continued, his eyes twinkling. Harry wondered if the headmaster knew what an awful fraud he’d hired, or if he just didn’t have any other options.

After another chaotic rendition of the school song – one sure to qualify as a lyrical felony in most jurisdictions, they were finally dismissed to seek their beds.

Harry was full and dozy as they followed Percy to the Gryffindor tower. He barely registered the glares coming from some of the Slytherins. He tried to memorize the password, ‘wattlebird’, as they trooped into the common room. Harry was tempted to warm himself by the fire, but he knew he’d probably fall asleep down here if he did. After making sure everyone knew to get up two hours early for practice, he made his way up to the dormitory. He managed to change into his pyjamas before falling asleep.

Harry woke up thrashing wildly, knocking the covers to the floor. It took him a long moment to realize he was at Hogwarts, and not inside a collapsing house in Devon. That had been a particularly close call. He still had no idea how the Death Eaters had located them, but they were damned lucky Hermione had spotted them before they stepped out the back door. As it was, the three of them managed to return fire from behind cover, instead of being cut down in an ambush. Unfortunately, as Ron stunned the last one, a stray Reducto curse collapsed the back wall of the kitchen, bringing down a section of the roof. Hermione and Ron managed to step back in time, but Harry was knocked out and pinned under the rubble. He awoke as they were digging him out, but with his arm and both legs trapped it was hard not to panic. Recognizing his distress, Hermione held his hand and stroked his face while Ron cleared away the boards and pieces of siding. He was covered with cuts and bruises when they were done, but the terror of being trapped and helpless stayed with him even longer.

By the time he got his breathing back under control, Harry was quite thoroughly awake. He sat up and put on his dressing gown. He started to dig quill and parchment out of his trunk before he remembered that Ginny was here at Hogwarts this year. No need for

letters. The clock showed that he had at least two hours before everyone else would be getting up for practice, so he selected a book on mid-level healing charms and went down to the common room.

Harry was surprised to find anyone in the common room at this hour, let alone Ginny. She was sleeping half-reclined on the couch, with her head resting on the arm. He stared at her for a moment, then took a blanket off the back of the couch and tucked her in. He paid special attention to her feet, remembering her complaints about how cold they got while she slept. That done, he picked an armchair near the fire and settled down with his book.

When it was nearly time for the morning run, Harry closed his book and stood up, stretching. He nudged Ginny until her eyes opened, whereupon she sat up so suddenly that they almost knocked heads together.

“Oh, Harry, I, er...”

“Had trouble sleeping?” he asked.

She nodded, her face quite red. She rubbed at her eyes and blinked owlishly.

“Happens to me all the time,” Harry assured her. “Is this your first time sleeping away from home?”

“Nearly.”

“Then I’d be surprised if you didn’t have trouble. It’s almost time to go run, and I’d appreciate it if you could make sure Luna was up as well.”

Ginny eyed him speculatively. “Is she going to be joining us for the - other practices as well?”

Harry put on a thoughtful frown. “I suppose that might be a good idea.”

Harry remembered that Ginny was never one to beat around the bush when she wanted to know something. “Why?” she asked.

“Well, from what you described, she’s a good person, but she’s going to have a rough go of it here if she doesn’t have some people looking out for her. The only problem I see is in classes, since you two will be separated from the rest of us. In that case it’ll be up to you to watch out for her.”

Ginny’s swallowed. “I’ll do that,” she said firmly. She surprised Harry by giving him a quick hug and then dashing up the stairs to her dormitory.

Half an hour later they were all trotting out of the entrance hall and onto the grounds. Harry kept the pace reasonable so Luna could keep up. Nonetheless, her fair complexion was beet red half-way through. Neville, of all people, dropped back as she began to lag and talked to her as she slowed.

“I had a rough time when we first started,” he said, puffing a bit. “It gets easier after you do it for a while.”

Luna nodded, too out of breath to reply.

After everyone was warmed up, they began doing some stretches, with Harry and Ginny showing Luna how. After that, Harry spent the rest of the physical practice time working with Luna on basic stances and blocks.

After the first hour, they all sat down around a large tree near the lake. Harry explained how Hermione had figured out that the potions professor was using Legilimency on students, and then went over the basics of Occlumency. Everyone else focused on the meditation exercises. Neville had returned Harry’s Occlumency book, so he offered to loan it to Luna, on condition that she didn’t let other people see her reading it.

“We’re trying to keep this as quiet as possible until we know how he’s going to react,” Harry explained.

Neville grunted. “He’s a complete bastard,” he said without opening his eyes. “If he knew exactly what book we were learning this from, he’d probably try to get it confiscated.”

"If we fought it, he'd have a little trouble explaining why he doesn't want us learning Occlumency," Harry disagreed.

"He'd find a way," Neville spat bitterly.

Of all the changes in his friends, Harry was most surprised by the ones in Neville. The regular exercise was changing the chubby, round-faced boy into a stocky block of muscle. Harry was ashamed at how little encouragement had actually been required to make such a huge change in the boy's self-confidence. Their conversation regarding their parents on the boat to the Sorting Ceremony had started the boy on an entirely different path. If Harry had made any sort of effort the first time around, he could have made a huge difference.

Neville's most significant change was regarding the potions professor that horribly intimidated him in another life. Watching Snape's relentless badgering of Harry infuriated the boy, and there were a few times Harry wouldn't have been surprised to see Neville whip out his wand and hex the man.

Harry received two surprises when he began checking his friends' defences: Neville's shields were almost as good as Hermione's, for all that he'd been practicing the shortest amount of time and her the longest. The second shock was when Harry tested Luna to see if she had any natural resistance to Legilimency. He was able to penetrate her mind with little difficulty, but the bewildering welter of images and associations he found inside was almost overwhelming. Intrigued, Harry stayed longer than he normally would have. It wasn't like he was invading her privacy – the only thing he could pick up was a steadily worsening headache.

*Well that's... interesting, he mused. This may work out better than I thought it would.*

Harry's headache was just fading as they headed inside to shower and change for breakfast. Their morning meal was noticeably calmer without a Howler from Mrs. Weasley, though Harry did wonder what Dobby was getting himself up to since he wasn't trying to 'save' Harry.

He smiled warmly at Professor McGonagall when she handed him his class schedule. It probably disconcerted her, but it was hard for him to take her stern persona seriously... not after the way she'd ripped into Umbridge on his behalf in his prior life.

Soon they split up. Ginny and Luna had charms first period, while the rest of them were off to Herbology.

Professor Sprout was noticeably cheerier, what with not having to bandage the Whomping Willow with Lockhart's less than stellar advice. She greeted them warmly as they joined the Gryffindor and Hufflepuff students assembling in front of the greenhouses. Once everyone was there, she led them to greenhouse number three. This locked outbuilding housed some of the more dangerous plants covered in the second year curriculum.

Harry smiled when Neville's hand shot up before Hermione's when Professor Sprout asked about the properties of Mandrakes.

"Mandrake is used to brew extremely powerful restoratives. Mandrake distillations are the active ingredient in many potions used to reverse transfigurations and curses. In addition to its uses as an antidote, it's also dead useful for eliminating common pests in the greenhouse."

Professor Sprout frowned. "How so, Mr. Longbottom?"

"Well, I keep some in pots in the centre of my greenhouse at home. Once a week I put on some earmuffs and pull one up for a minute. The cry of the mandrake is fatal to anything that can hear it, so most household pests immediately snuff it."

"Well done, Mr. Longbottom!" Professor Sprout beamed. "That's an ingenious use for what many consider to be a liability of cultivating Mandrake. Thirty points to Gryffindor! Neville is correct about the Mandrake's cry. While these are only seedlings we're repotting today, their cry can at least knock you out. So make sure you get those earmuffs on tight!" Some of the Hufflepuffs looked a little disgruntled at the generous award their head of house had given to a Gryffindor, but none of them raised their hands, so it was their own fault.

Harry wasn't as surprised by the squalling-baby appearance of the uprooted Mandrake this time, though it was still disturbing. He just hoped they didn't need to be brewing mandrake restoratives this year.

With the four of them working together, they didn't end up grouping with Justin Finch-Fletchley. Harry wondered about that, but didn't see how that would hurt anything in the new timeline. With the diary locked away, the Muggle-born student wouldn't be attacked this time around.

By the end of the class they were still filthy and sweaty from stuffing uncooperative, muddy, fat babies into their new pots. Harry really wanted a shower, but he barely had time to wash his face and hands before they had to be in transfiguration.

Professor McGonagall's class was more a free-for-all than Herbology, where Neville was the clear expert. Hermione was usually first with the answers, but not always. Surprisingly, Ron even beat them all once. Hermione's pleased grin made the red-head's ears turn pink, and Harry wondered how much he'd studied over the summer.

By the end of the class, they were all competing to see who could transfigure a beetle into the most elaborate button. Professor McGonagall came over to see why they needed so many beetles, but just shook her head when she saw the results of the button-making contest.

Lunch was fairly quiet, though Ginny was laughing about their first charms lecture. She thought Professor Flitwick was terribly cute. Hermione was scandalized at the implied disrespect, and she was all set to chastise Ginny about it when Luna chimed in.

"Ginny, it isn't nice to laugh about someone who was victimized by green-winged fump-gizers," Luna said in her characteristic dead-pan drawl.

That pretty much stopped Hermione in her tracks. "Green-winged whats?"

"Fump-gizers. They love to attack small children and drain away all their potential for growth. I'd say Professor Flitwick ran into a whole

nest of them, and at an early age too, more's the pity. They must have stolen every inch he had coming to him. It's quite tragic. But if they bite an adult, nothing happens, since they've already got all the height they're going to get."

"Do you think Hagrid could have used some of those growing up?" Ron asked Harry in a low voice.

"That... that's preposterous!' Hermione sputtered.

Luna just looked at Hermione with no expression on her face. After nearly a minute the older girl was starting to shift uncomfortably on the seat. When Luna spoke, there was no rancour in her voice, just a solemn curiosity. "You sound like our Muggle neighbours who don't believe in magic. Why is that?"

Hermione almost flinched back, but didn't say anything. She looked almost confused, and then she peered very intently at the blond first-year. Almost as soon as their eyes met, Hermione flinched back. She shook her head, rubbing at her eyes. "I've never heard of any sort of Fump-gizers, Luna, and they aren't in Scamander's guide. Where did you read about those?"

"There was an article about them in the Quibbler. I think I can get you the issue if you'd like."

Hermione nodded slowly, still rubbing her temples.

When they finished eating, Ron suggested they go out to the courtyard for some fresh air before their next class. As they left the Great Hall, Harry hung back until he was walking next to Hermione, who was still frowning.

"You tried to use Legilimency on Luna," he said. It wasn't a question.

Hermione nodded cautiously. "Something very odd happened."

"I know. Happened to me at practice. Either she's a genius or a functional schizophrenic. Either way she's difficult to read."

"Do you think she's... all right, Harry?"

“She seems okay on the outside. She may just be one of those people like Einstein – can’t do Algebra, can’t balance a chequebook, but turns around and helps create the special theory of relativity.”

“You mean that’s how her mind actually works?” Hermione asked.

“Yeah, I think it is,” Harry answered. “Just working with you lot, I know each of you has a slightly different feel. Hers is just different – a lot different.”

“I see.” Hermione had looking thoughtful down to an art form.

Harry had one more thing for her to think about though. “You know, I don’t think we should be using Legilimency on our friends, outside of practice.”

Hermione did not blush easily, but once she actually was embarrassed her face went solid red every time. “I suppose that isn’t very ethical, is it.”

“No, I think we should limit non-consensual snooping to known enemies. I would appreciate it if you would make a habit of assessing everyone’s shields next time we practice,” Harry said.

“I thought you were picking up Legilimency fairly quickly,” Hermione said.

“I am,” Harry said with a pause. “I’d like to have a second observer. I wonder sometimes if the sense of who is trying to probe your mind can impact how effective your Occlumency is.”

“That’s not a bad idea, Harry, I’ll do it next time we practice - just maybe not with Luna,” she said with a small smile.

He returned her smile and they eased past what could have been an awkward conversation. Harry remembered how often the three of them used to fight, and how trivial the reasons usually were. A good bit of it was his fault too, given how awkward he was and how easily he flew off the handle about some things. Burying all of the people he loved gave Harry a new perspective on things, and a lot more tolerance for their little quirks.



It wasn't until they were already out in the courtyard that Harry remembered a rather embarrassing conversation with Colin Creevey. Just like last time the junior stalker edged forward with his camera and started badgering Harry about taking a picture of him. Harry purposefully misunderstood him and gathered his friends for a group shot of all six of them. They looked at him a little oddly, but the frantic plea in Harry's eyes forestalled any questions - though Ginny and Hermione looked mildly amused.

After Colin snapped the picture, he of course did the worst possible thing. "Um, H-Harry, could you sign it for me? So I can send it to my Dad?"

"Signed photos? You're giving out signed photos, Potter?" Draco sneered. Besides his skill with nasty bits of magic he had no business knowing, the Malfoy heir was a positive genius at saying things in as insulting a manner as possible. "Everyone line up!" he roared, "Harry Potter's giving out signed photos!"

"Sorry, everyone, Malfoy is having delusions again," Harry called out. He kept his voice light, even though he could feel his face getting hot. "The family syphilis appears to be rotting his brains early," he spat.

About half the crowd got the implications of that last remark, which made their eyes widen. Fortunately, Draco was sufficiently versed in the seamier aspects of life to understand the insult. Of course, his father was a Death Eater, and he'd probably picked up a thing or two in the course of his 'recreational activities'. Harry just ignored Hermione's elbow, no matter how much she dug it into his side.

"Potter, you lying half-blood," Draco snarled. Crabbe and Goyle were right behind him, and Parkinson, Bulstrode, Nott, and Zabini were close by. "I heard-"

"You heard Colin ask me to sign a photo he took, something which I am not inclined to do, so shut your trap," Harry said firmly.

Colin looked so furious he was about to cry. Maybe he thought he'd have got his autograph if Draco hadn't said anything. "Shut up Malfay," Colin said, "you're just jealous."

"It's *Malfoy*, you ignorant little Mudblood. And I don't think having a huge scar on my head makes me special, unlike Potter and his little crew."

"Just like having a father rich enough to buy his way out of Azkaban doesn't make you special, either, Draco."

"Envious, Potter?" Draco asked with a sneer. Something about the boy's expression bothered Harry.

"No, because after you've spent all your inherited money, you'll still be a useless parasite," Harry snapped.

"What's all this? What's all this?" Professor Lockhart said as he strode toward Harry, his turquoise robes swirling around him. "Who's giving out signed photos? Besides me, that is?" He chuckled at his own quip.

Harry started to step back but the man reached out and grabbed Harry's shoulder and pulled him in against his side. "Come now, Mr. Creevey, you can get a picture of both us and we'll sign it. Can't do much better than that, can we?"

Harry debated breaking the man's instep, but instead he simply ducked down and dropped from the man's arm. He let himself somersault backward and rose to his feet in one smooth motion. Colin got a good picture of a rather confused Professor Lockhart staring down at his left armpit. Later that night Harry would trade Colin two pictures of himself for that one of Lockhart. The man hardly ever took a picture that was less than perfect so just owning it was a petty form of revenge.

Lockhart turned around and saw Harry standing behind him. He reached forward, but seemed to reconsider. "Come with me, please, Harry. We have something to discuss before class."

Harry gave his friends a disgusted look, but Hermione and Neville just shrugged. Ron was still glaring at Draco and fingering his wand. Harry really hoped a fire-fight didn't break out when he wasn't there to join in. He noticed Ginny was standing slightly in front of Luna,

shielding her from the Slytherins. Harry felt an odd surge of pride, but he hoped she knew some kind of blocking spell.

Lockhart quick-marched him to the Defence classroom. "A word to the wise, Harry," he said as he opened the door. "I was trying to cover for you out there. If both of us sign a picture for the lad, it doesn't look quite so bad; Otherwise, at this stage in your career, handing out autographed photos like that... it looks a bit big-headed you know?"

Harry sighed and made a sincere effort to reign in his temper. "Did you listen to anything I said out there?" he said sharply. "I wasn't signing any photos of me. Colin took a photo of about half the Gryffindor second-years and Draco Malfoy tried to make a big deal out of it. I have absolutely no interest in cultivating my 'fame' as such. I got this scar the night my parents were murdered, so I hope you'll understand if I consider it less than a blessing."

"Oh Harry," Lockhart said with a quiet laugh and laid his hand on Harry's shoulder in a disquietingly familiar manner. "You are so naïve it's almost painful. We can only make do with what we are given. You have a scar gained in a most spectacular manner. I have devastatingly good looks, unmatched magical skills, and unquestioned literary talents. It's all about getting as much as you can with the gifts you have."

"The gifts... you do know that your predecessor was possessed by Voldemort and tried to kill me, right?" Harry asked.

"Harry... into each life a little rain must fall. Do you know how many young witches have tried to break into my flat?" Lockhart asked rhetorically. "Some of them were not so young, either." He finished the last sentence with a shudder.

Harry stared at the professor. *This man is not even speaking the same language I am.*

"I understand if you were feeling a little out of sorts at the bookstore," Lockhart said in a grand manner. "Part of being a celebrity is knowing how to react when life throws these little opportunities our way. I can help you there. And your pull added to mine, throw in all the cachet of Hogwarts nostalgia and a warm student-teacher bond, and we can

make weekly headlines. I wouldn't be surprised if we were invited to functions every weekend until end of term. Wouldn't that be grand?"

Harry blinked and said the first thing that popped into his mind. "I'd have some trouble getting all my homework and revision done if I'm gone all weekend."

"Oh tosh, Harry, I'm talking about something important here! I'm talking about our picture on the front page once a week, maybe even twice!"

"You know," Harry replied sarcastically as he tried to gather his wits, "It's refreshing to meet a professor who isn't all hung up on academics." The magnitude of the man's gall was awe-inspiring.

Professor Lockhart smiled ruefully. "The position was mine for the asking, since no one wants to risk that so-called curse. Besides, it's not like this is really an important class, is it? Most students will never need to use what they learn in here anyway. Those that do, well, they aren't going to be complaining, now are they?"

Harry felt his faint smile pull into a grimace. *Okay, you negligent son of a bitch. You've got to go, the sooner the better.*

"You don't need to give me an answer now, Harry," Lockhart said with a paternal smile. "Just think about it. We can do great things for each other, great things." Harry was suddenly reminded of Ollivander, talking about his wand. It was just about as comfortable a memory too.

Students began filing into the room and Harry went to sit with his friends. Hermione seemed to frown when she saw his face, so he supposed that horrible grimace was still there. He had a strong urge to ask to be excused so he could go take a shower.

Harry dutifully filled out Lockhart's exercise in ego-gratification he called a quiz. *It'll be easier to get him sacked if he doesn't suspect anything*, he reasoned. *Maybe I should just aim for something more general, like just 'get rid of him', and see what opportunities arise.*

The Defence professor's speech about how his job was to 'arm them against the foulest creatures known to wizardkind!' fell a little flat in Harry's ears when he recalled the man's earlier words. Apparently that twinkle in his eye was from sarcastic amusement, or perhaps satisfaction in his own acting skills. The man was just as much a superficial fake as the Dursleys, and just as poisonous in his own way. He'll willingly send his students out into the world without any real idea of how to handle things... he'll send them out like sheep to the slaughter.

*Maybe we can show people how to do it right,* he mused.

When Lockhart unleashed the Cornish pixies, Harry's wand was already in his hand. "Back to back," he barked to his friends, "stunners only or we'll be all night cleaning up the mess." They immediately jumped up from their seats and formed a ring.

As the pixies began to trash the classroom, Harry and his friends began casting. They'd gone over the stunning spell right before summer break. His friends were definitely good enough with it to knock out something as small as a pixie. Arranged as they were, no matter what direction they were dive-bombed from, there was a wizard or witch with a wand at the ready. Harry and Hermione were the most accurate, dropping a pixie with every cast. Ron and Neville weren't far behind, and their follow-ups always found the target. Harry made a point of not targeting the pixies attacking Lockhart until after they'd taken his wand and chased him under his desk.

Seamus and Dean were having a harder time of it, especially after Seamus had a full ink bottle emptied over his head, staining his sandy hair black. Lavender and Parvati were under their own desks in less than a minute.

The remaining pixies began to recognize the threat posed by the four standing Gryffindors and began concentrating on them. They were all shot out of the air until the remaining three dived at Harry all at once. He managed to catch two with *Stupefy* spells as they flew towards his face and in desperation back-fisted the third.

The last pixie arced across the classroom with a high-pitched wail. Lockhart evidently heard the reduction in pixie cries and decided it

was safe to get out from under his desk. That was how he ended up getting a black eye from a flying pixie and fell back down with a small scream.

Harry just wished he'd had Colin's camera to immortalize the moment.

Ginny was howling by the time Ron finished describing their first Defence Against the Dark Arts class. Harry discreetly put his hand behind her back as she started to fall off the bench, and other people eating dinner were staring at them. Dean and Seamus were noticeably less amused, mostly because the latter still had a huge black blot in his hair. All in all, the four of them had garnered a good bit of respect from their classmates.

Hermione was rather quiet about the whole thing, though she didn't stop them as Ron and Neville told the other girls about the whole debacle. She picked at her food after they finished and finally spoke up. "I wonder if he did that on purpose," she said.

"What do you mean, on purpose?" Ron asked.

"Like some sort of psychological exercise, to see how we react in an unexpected situation."

"If that's the case," Neville said, grinning, "I think we nailed it, eh, Harry?"

"I will fear no pixie!" Harry said in a deep voice, raising his chin. Unfortunately, no one got his Admiral Nelson impression. He snorted. "Seriously," he said in a quieter voice, "we had a little chat before class that was quite illuminating."

Hermione raised an eyebrow at him.

"Later," he mouthed, and immediately changed the subject. "So how did you two like your first transfiguration class?"

Ginny began describing the first class, including McGonagall's startling Animagus transformation. Luna was quiet for the most part, though she did wonder aloud how long their head of house could remain a cat without being subject to hair balls. That little comment

earned her a dirty look from Hermione after Ron choked on his pumpkin juice and sprayed a little across the table. Luna gave Hermione a bland smile and handed her a napkin.

After dinner, the six of them retired to the Gryffindor common room to continue their discussion. They settled in a quiet corner and Harry repeated the conversation verbatim. With as many secrets as he had to keep from them, Harry tried to make up for it by being scrupulously honest and open on any matters unrelated to his future knowledge. When he was done he turned to Hermione. "That's why I don't think today's class was a put up job. He really is a fraud."

The bushy-haired girl didn't disagree with him, but she did seem upset. "I suppose I was a bit of an idiot then," she said ruefully.

"Bollocks," Ron snapped, making her turn toward him sharply. "That smarmy git has fooled tons of people, Mum included. She's bought all his books and thinks Dumbledore was lucky to hire him."

Hermione's face had a startled expression, but she didn't chide Ron for his language. Instead she gave him a warm smile that left him looking rather confused.

A/N:

Hmmm... over ten thousand words to cover two days. But a lot did happen.

In case anyone was wondering, I'm not a Gilderoy Lockhart fan.

Thanks to my excellent Brit-pickers for catching a couple of slips last chapter! (See the reviews if you want to know who – mentioning them by name in Author Notes just might get the story deleted.)

Some of you may find Luna to be a bit OOC compared to canon. Keep in mind that we don't see Luna in canon until after she's endured three years of steadily worsening harassment from her housemates. Chibi-Luna is a strange child, but not as aggressively weird as canon-Luna who uses it as a defense mechanism.

Plot discussions and Q&A will be addressed on my yahoo group (viridiandreams, see my author profile for the link), as I have been warned that excessive author notes are a no-no.

Thanks for reading!

-Matthew



## Chapter 20

Being the headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry was not an easy job. Neither was leading the Order of the Phoenix during the first war against Voldemort. But both jobs entailed fewer headaches than being the sole person aware of the entire Prophecy.

*The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches ... Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies ... And the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not ... And either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives ...*

It seemed rather simple at first; at least after the tragedy in Godric's Hollow. The Potters were betrayed, but baby Harry struck down Voldemort at the height of his powers. Their betrayer was soon locked away at Azkaban and Wizarding society began its slow, halting ascent from the dark times.

Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore sat in his office, trying to enjoy a lemon sherbet, trying to ignore his growing headache. "A riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma," a Muggle Prime Minister had once said. It was a singularly apt description of one Harry James Potter.

The boy was hiding something. That much was clear. He had the strongest Occlumency the headmaster had ever encountered, yet he seemed to be unaware of Legilimency. While 'naturally occluded' minds were not unheard of, they were quite rare. On the other hand, his painful reaction to repeated probing was in line with the handful of case histories he'd researched since that meeting.

Severus was openly suspicious of the boy, but the potion master's objectivity toward anyone named Potter was questionable. His behaviour toward the boy and others had been deplorable on more than one occasion.

Nevertheless, his theory regarding possession by Voldemort was technically possible, even within a loose interpretation of the Prophecy. However, the Sorting Hat had never been wrong before.

After that meeting, he'd even donned it himself – just to confirm that they could converse, no matter how he engaged his own Occlumency.

The hat declared that there was nothing inside the boy's head but his own mind. It had also sorted him into Gryffindor. While at least one Gryffindor later became a betrayer, the boy had only been sorted a year ago. Was it possible to deceive the Hat in any significant way?

Academically, the boy's performance was stellar. He and Miss Granger regularly duelled for the top honours in most of their classes. Mr. Potter had also lucked into becoming the youngest Quidditch player in over a century. His knowledge and drive to succeed reminded him of another young boy from so long ago.

Tom Riddle.

Like Riddle, Harry had surrounded himself with a coterie of other young students. They seemed just as loyal as the group that later became the first Death Eaters. That this group also included the Longbottom boy, who was, coincidentally the other possible child of the Prophecy, was also a concern. Miss Granger's intellect was formidable, as Severus reported she was starting to deduce his use of Legilimency from a startlingly small number of clues. Of course, the way he described it was somewhat different in tone. Mister Weasley started the year as an average student, but under the influence of the others his academic performance had risen dramatically.

Harry's association with the Weasleys was also troubling. He'd known Arthur since the Weasley patriarch was eleven years old, and the man had been a staunch ally through the darkest days of the war. But after coming into contact with young Harry, he'd been like a different person.

Harry's obvious anger and distrust were understandable, if what he said happened in his aunt's house was true. The possibilities were disturbing either way. Of course he was dismayed to discover the boy had been injured. But there was something else going on there as well. He wasn't proud of the subtle hints he'd implanted in Vernon Dursley's mind, but in the absence of gross provocation or other meddling, the boy should have been safe. When that had not proven

sufficient, he was more than willing to take more drastic measures, but Arthur's mind was already made up.

He didn't really understand why the Weasleys were so adamant about taking care of Harry, but the boy had shown signs of being adept at manipulating people. He'd never seen Severus Snape so enraged by a first-year student before. Not to the point of jeopardizing his tenure at Hogwarts. Minerva was also exceedingly sympathetic toward the boy. Few Gryffindors had sufficient restraint and maturity to make that kind of impression on their head of house.

The boy clearly impressed Amelia Bones, and that was no simple task. After there was some sort of difficulty with their advocate, the boy utilized a loop-hole to speak directly to the triumvirate on behalf of the Weasleys application for guardianship. While he was reportedly polite in his speech, he was also very firm in his convictions, and presented a very strong case for his preferred guardians.

The headmaster had asked Amos to apply as a personal favour, though the prestige of raising Harry Potter would no doubt further his career. Due to his work for the Ministry, the Diggory's' home in Ottery Saint Catchpole was extremely secure, and it would be much easier to keep tabs on the boy's activities there.

Of course, it would have been an utter disaster if Lucius Malfoy had gotten his hooks into the boy. It was doubtful that he'd have ever returned to Hogwarts at that point. Nonetheless it was disturbing how the boy had still managed to get his way, despite the concerns of older and wiser adults.

It was a little suspicious how much the boy knew about things that were not part of his class work, especially considering how he was raised. On the other hand, young Harry could hardly be found without a book in his hand, a habit he shared with Miss Granger. Minerva also confided in him that Harry was a chronic insomniac, and spent much of the night with book and quill. Of course, it wouldn't be too unusual for someone who survived the killing curse to suffer long term effects. The boy's fragmented memories of that awful night seemed sufficient cause.

That was another troubling revelation. The boy claimed to have memories of the night his parents were killed. It would be very unusual for someone to remember something from that age, even worse for it to be the sounds of their parents being murdered. At first he'd been sceptical of the implications. While Sirius Black had never received a formal trial, the evidence against him was overwhelming. The Ministry was not interested in re-opening the case against Black, not with all the bad press that could create. The alleged capture of Peter Pettigrew was stirring things up though. It was an unlikely coincidence that the fugitive Animagus just happened to be hiding out at The Burrow, but Albus managed to talk to Auror Shacklebolt before he'd been shuffled off to Italy.

Kingsley reported that Arthur recognized Peter from Black's description of the boy's Animagus form and contacted the Auror for assistance in capturing the rat. The Aurors on duty in Azkaban also confirmed the facts of that conversation. It was all just a fortuitous coincidence, it seems. Of course the Ministry was still dragging its feet in admitting their terrible blunder. No doubt he would soon be hearing from Harry or Arthur, if not both, if steps were not taken.

Unlikely coincidences would also describe the boy's habit of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. The only thing more unlikely was Harry's ability to get himself out of those situations. Though he'd suffered a broken arm, few adult wizards could have dealt with a fully-grown troll in so decisive a fashion. He was also in just the right place at the right time to stop Quirrell from obtaining the stone for his master. There were always explanations, but taken together they started to become more and more strained. He almost wished he hadn't returned James' cloak to the boy, but it really wasn't his to keep. He also hoped that the belated gift might soften the boy's anger towards his parents, as well as himself. Besides, the boy may need its protection at some point, given the enemies he'd already made.

In the end, there was no rational basis for his suspicions, really. But it occurred to him that while the child marked by the Prophecy would be inevitably opposed to Voldemort, it never guaranteed he would not be dark himself. It was a troubling thought as he savoured the sour aftertaste of his favourite confection.

He was jolted out of his thoughts as the gargoyle informed him a very angry person was approaching. Albus Dumbledore checked the time. Yes, the second year Gryffindor-Slytherin potions class had just ended.

Harry blessed his friends that week as they ran interference between him and Colin Creevey. It was impossible to actively dislike the excitable first year student, and Harry didn't want to directly tell him off because he wasn't sure the little fellow wouldn't have a breakdown. Not only would he feel like a cad, but he'd also be playing into Malfoy's accusations as well. It was easier by far to pretend to not hear the boy when he was apparently engrossed in a conversation with one of his friends.

Of course, Colin wasn't the only person he was avoiding. Harry made a big show of being in a hurry when Gilderoy Lockhart was nearby. The only time the man could reliably corner Harry was during meal times, and then only for a few minutes. The great fraud also seemed to be less enthusiastic about conversing in front of witnesses – probably because he'd need to keep track of more than one set of lies at once.

But the one person Harry least wished to meet, he had no opportunity to avoid. It was with a palpable sense of dread that the four of them entered the potions laboratory for their first class. Professor Snape's black eyes glittered in the dim light as he glared at them.

Harry tried to repeat his stratagem from last term. He weakened the defences around his mind until it should appear acutely vulnerable. Sure enough, as soon as Snape's lecture was over and they began brewing a simple emulsifying solution, Harry felt twinges that indicated a Legilimens was trying to penetrate his mind. Harry blinked rapidly as the twinges became painful, but they soon stopped. Neville, who was partnered with him for this exercise, began to frown slightly. A moment later, Hermione looked up from her cauldron, her face pale in the torchlight.

*Damn, Harry fumed; he's going after them again. It's even worse now that they've started learning Occlumency, because now they can start to feel that bastard poking around in their minds. Snape's face grew*

thunderous and Hermione's jaw trembled. *He's digging for something and she's fighting him tooth and nail. He must be looking for how she figured it out.* She wasn't even making a pretext of stirring her cauldron anymore. Ron looked up at her as a furious tear tracked down her cheek.

Harry locked eyes with the potions teacher and lashed out with his own Legilimency. He wasn't so much digging for information as just - squeezing - as hard as he could. He didn't know what effect that would have, but his mind's eye pictured crushing the man's skull like an overripe fruit. Nothing happened as the man's defences stiffened, but Hermione let out a tremulous sigh. Harry twitched as he suddenly had the image of a diamond-hard wedge dig into the boundaries of his own mind, seeking to cleave it in two. He countered by imagining burning the Professor to death, an inch at a time, starting with his toes.

He was jolted out of his reverie when a thick volume fell from the Professor's desk. It struck the floor with a loud thud that echoed in the dungeon, making most of the students jump. Snape's features were locked in a rictus of fury.

It was going to be a long class.

None of them looked up as they turned in their flasks. Harry didn't even turn around when he heard the sounds of glassware shattering on the stone floor. As soon as they were out in the corridor, Harry whispered in Hermione's ear and then quickly ducked into the bathroom.

Seeing it was empty, Harry pulled his invisibility cloak out of this bag and pulled it over his shoulders. He'd just settled it into place before the door opened again and he had to side-step an older Slytherin boy. Harry slipped out the door before it closed again. Once in the corridor, Harry settled into a nook next to one of the suits of armour and kept watch on the door to the potions lab.

Sure enough, less than five minutes later, Professor Snape came storming out of the office, his face like a thundercloud about to let loose. Harry shadowed the furious wizard all the way to the headmaster's office. He needed some answers.

“Gumdrops,” the man snarled. He brushed past the gargoyle as it leapt aside. Harry followed a bit more cautiously. Snape practically threw himself up the escalator, while Harry waited at the foot of it. There was just enough room for him to stand there as the passageway closed again. On an idle evening while Harry was recovering from a skirmish, Albus’ portrait told him that the gargoyle magically reported everything it saw to the current headmaster, but it wasn’t as perceptive as the headmaster himself. Harry was banking on the fact that it wouldn’t be able to see through the invisibility cloak like its master could.

Harry knew the inner door wasn’t soundproof, but Snape didn’t even bother closing it.

“Ah Severus, and what brings you here on this fine morning?” Harry could almost imagine the headmaster’s eyes twinkling as he said that.

“Potter, Headmaster, what else?”

“And what is he up to now?”

“He and that insufferable know it all Granger have somehow pieced together that we have been using Legilimency. He’s been teaching his verminous little friends how to block me out!”

“Severus, I will remind you that they are still students, and should be respected as such.”

“I will show them as much respect as they have shown me.”

Harry heard a sigh. “How did they figure it out?”

“Granger isn’t quite as good as she thinks she is. I managed to pull that information out of her, along with her delusions of adequacy and disturbingly adolescent infatuations. Your words were actually the give-away, Albus.”

“Oh?”

“You should have expelled Potter when you found him in the restricted section, rather than warning him. Their nightly forays were

not known to anyone else, so she surmised that the information had been extracted from her mind.”

“Interesting. She is rather sharp, isn’t she?”

“I suppose. For being a Mudblood with no sense of respect, I suppose there should be some consolation.”

“Severus, I will not hear that word used in my presence.”

“Fine. For an insufferable know it all with no respect for her betters.”

Another sigh. “I have also discovered what young Mr. Potter was seeking in the Restricted Section. He was looking for information on the Fidelius Charm. He remembered some of James and Lily’s last words, when they mentioned that spell.”

Harry could almost hear Snape’s head snap around as this information pierced his tantrum. “Why is that so important?” he asked in a quiet voice.

There was a long pause. “Peter Pettigrew was captured by the Ministry a week ago. There are indications that he was the secret keeper, rather than Black.”

Harry could have sworn he felt the air around him grow cold.

“It doesn’t matter. Black still massacred a dozen Muggles. He’ll die in Azkaban.”

“Severus, Peter’s capture means the investigation will be reopened.”

“Perhaps, I doubt that will happen though.”

“And why is that?”

“Some remarks Lucius made a few days ago are making more sense now. He mentioned in passing that an important prisoner was being held under wraps until ‘the point was moot’, whatever that means. I have no doubt that there are many in the Ministry who would prefer that this matter never see the light of day.”



"Is there a reason you didn't tell me about this?"

"Other than the fact that I only made the connection with what you just told me regarding Pettigrew? Besides, Azkaban is no more than Black deserves."

"Severus, if he is innocent-"

"He tried to kill me!"

"And James saved you."

The silence was palpable.

"Why was Lucius Malfoy so concerned about this, anyway?"

"I imagine it has to do with his wife being the last of the Blacks, discounting Sirius and Bellatrix who are in Azkaban. With Sirius dead, Narcissa would receive half the Black fortune. When Bellatrix dies, she'll receive the other half."

"It would be better for that money not to end up under Lucius' control. His wealth has purchased him half the Ministry as it is."

"Do not expect me to spare any efforts toward freeing Black. Besides, if it looked like a trial was inevitable, I imagine he'll be accidentally kissed by a dementor. Such a tragedy that would be."

Harry's blood went cold. He ruthlessly suppressed his emotions before another accidental magic outburst gave his presence away.

"I am... disappointed in you, Severus. Back to the matter at hand, why are you here?"

"Why am I - Headmaster, we cannot allow these impudent delinquents to get away with this!"

A third sigh. "What do you propose we do?"

"Expell them all!" Harry could almost imagine Snape was frothing at the mouth by now. He had no idea how infuriating the headmaster's patience could be when used against someone that far out of control.

“And how would we explain this action? The use of Legilimency on students has never been officially sanctioned, and I doubt it ever will be. Many would consider it a frightful breach of privacy, no matter how well-intentioned. I doubt you would be accorded that much benevolence, as your reputation does you no good there.”

“Fine then. How do you propose we stop them?”

“Severus, we can’t prohibit them from learning a branch of magic that has no use aside from preventing unwanted, not to mention unwarranted, intrusions.”

“Headmaster! They. Are. Up. To. Something!”

“I have no doubt that they are, or at least that young Harry was some hidden agenda. But what has he actually done? He killed a troll that poor Quirinius was compelled to let into the school... saving the life of one or more of his fellow students. He also stopped Voldemort from procuring the stone and regaining his powers. Thus far, I believe he had earned some small degree of trust.”

“He’s been training those friends of his in Muggle fighting skills. Are you content to let a student form his own gang within the school?”

“Of course not. But then again, when have they behaved aggressively without provocation? Severus, I understand you’ve had a difficult time trying to bring around some of the students in your house. But I’m starting to wonder if I’ve given you too much leeway with respect to their behaviour.”

“Headmaster, I’m not sure I understand what you mean.”

“I mean that every time I... investigate... a complaint about aggressive behaviour by Harry or one of his friends, I invariably find a member of *your* house was the instigator. One might think the whole thing was organized with the express purpose of having one or more students removed from Hogwarts.”

If anything, the air had become even colder.

“I will see if there is any substance to the suspicions, headmaster, and act accordingly. Good day.”

With that, the upper door opened and the gargoyle moved aside just in time for Harry to exit the entryway ahead of Professor Snape. Harry didn't relish getting caught by the man after listening to the less than subtle dressing down he'd just received.

Harry had a lot to think about as he rejoined his friends. He actually felt more optimistic about Dumbledore than he had in a while. He wasn't willing to just let Snape run roughshod over them. It wasn't everything Harry could hope for, but it was a start.

On the other hand, Sirius' situation was just as bad as he thought, if not worse. The presence of a new warden at Azkaban was particularly ominous, if that threat about the kiss was more than just a pleasant fantasy for Snape. Draco's comments in the courtyard also took on a whole new meaning. *He meant I would be envious of his father's ability to get out of Azkaban because Sirius was stuck there. Maybe it's time to demonstrate that there's more than one kind of coin to spend.*

The look on Harry's face when he joined his friends for lunch left them more than willing to wait until they could talk privately. Luna and Ginny told a very funny story from their last charms class. Colin tried to enchant one of his many pictures of Harry to make it talk. Unfortunately, the picture he'd taken seemed to be in a rather cross mood, because its language was exceedingly vulgar. Colin couldn't make out all the words said by the tiny, high-pitched voice coming from the snapshot, but Professor Flitwick could and he was less than impressed.

Colin had also started sitting with Ginny and Luna in their classes. While he was obviously sucking up, Harry was also secretly glad. He had a quiet paranoia that someone would attack the girls when they were separated from the rest of the group. If that ever happened, an extra friendly wand in the vicinity couldn't hurt.

Of course Harry knew that was just his memory speaking. It was harder to blot out the Hogwarts Massacre when he was at the proverbial scene of the crime. It was particularly hard to suppress

when Ginny was around. The way she looked at him sometimes, he knew he was letting too much of his anxiety show. How can he tell her he wants to carry her off and so he can keep her safe? She'd either laugh or kick him where it hurt for thinking she was helpless.

They didn't have any classes after lunch, so they all walked down to the lake to enjoy the warmer weather before it was gone. Harry wanted to tell them what he'd overheard, but he couldn't share while their minds were still open. Just by existing, Snape was driving a wedge between him and his friends.

Still, he could do this subtly. "You know," he began, "something Malfoy said keeps sticking in my mind."

"Bah, I'd see Madam Pomfrey about that, mate!" Ron quipped.

"Shut it, you," Harry replied with a grin. "He said something about me envying being able to buy someone out of Azkaban. I think he knows something about Sirius."

"What motive would they have for being involved in a cover-up?" Hermione asked. "Who stands to gain from Sirius being imprisoned?"

"There are some people in the Ministry that will be embarrassed if this gets out," Neville said. "Some people may lose office over it."

"None of the Malfoys hold office though," Harry said, frowning.

"Maybe he doesn't want to have to buy new politicians?" Ron asked.

They speculated a bit longer, but no one made the connection that Narcissa's maiden name was Black. Harry sighed. *Maybe it didn't matter if they know. I'll just give them warning about what I'm going to do.* "I think I better go ahead and send that letter to Rita Skeeter. It's been too long and I'm getting really suspicious."

"If you want, I can go over the rough draft with you," Hermione offered.

"I'd appreciate it," Harry said with a grin. She always came out ahead on essay assignments.

Harry felt a little smug that he'd gone to bed early Friday night, so Oliver's extremely early morning summons didn't leave him dead on his feet. In fact, the Gryffindor captain was surprised when he stepped into their dormitory and found Harry, Ron, and Neville getting ready for their morning run. "Oh, er, right. You're already up? We have practice now."

Harry shrugged. "Okay Ron, you and Neville take everyone on their run. We'll probably still be at the pitch when you're done. Could one of you work one-on-one with Luna? She's got the most to make up."

"I'll take care of it," Neville said. "I need to work on the basics anyway."

"Right," Harry said, pulling his Quidditch robes and Nimbus 2000 out of his trunk.

"You've been working out?" Wood asked as they headed down the stairs.

"A run in the morning and some martial arts," Harry replied.

Oliver nodded approvingly. "I can tell. You've filled out a bit."

Harry shrugged as they brushed past Colin. "The twins joined us most of the time."

"Good! Most of the teams will be taking aim at us now," the team captain grinned.

When they reached the changing rooms, everyone else was asleep on their feet. Oliver began describing some new plays he'd put together over the summer. Unfortunately, even with a clear head, Oliver's game plans made almost no sense to Harry.

When Oliver lost his temper at the groggy twins, his spiel about the previous season was more upbeat, but just as impassioned. "Yes, we got the cup last year. So now, everyone is looking to take us out of the running at every opportunity. The other teams will bring their best games when they play us! We can't let our guard down, even for a moment!"

“Constant Vigilance!” Harry interjected. He really couldn’t help it.

“That’s right!” Oliver shouted. “We can’t let up on them, even for an instant. I want every game to be a blow-out. Any match we win by less than one hundred and fifty points we should consider a personal defeat!” He looked at his chasers. “Are you girls with me?”

Katie, Alicia, and Angelina blinked and nodded.

“Are you with me?” Oliver repeated.

The girls looked resignedly at each other. “Yes we are!” they shouted in reply.

“I want their Seekers and Chasers afraid to get near anything round,” Oliver snarled, turning toward the twins. “I want them terrified of flying by the time you’re done with them. Are you with me?”

“We’ll make them need to clean their brooms after the match,” one of them replied, starting to wake up. He nudged his brother.

“And we’ll make you lot forget they even have Bludgers. Right?”

Oliver looked pleased for just an instant. Then he led them out to the pitch.

Harry smiled when he saw his friends sitting together on the stands. They were still adamant about him not walking around by himself if they could help it, especially at scheduled times like Quidditch practices.

They were just getting started when the Slytherin team marched out onto the pitch. Harry followed Wood down to the grass, and noticed his friends already getting up from the stands.

“Flint!” Wood bellowed. “This is our practice time! We got up especially for this, so you can clear off now!”

Marcus Flint, who bore a more than passing resemblance to the troll they killed last year, had a nasty grin. “Plenty of room for all of us, Wood.”

Harry knew they'd love to hold a joint practice. Not only would it let them see any new plays Oliver put together, but it also gave them the opportunity to inflict some 'accidental' injuries.

"I booked the field!" Oliver insisted. "I booked it."

Harry suppressed a grin. While the Slytherins were all leering at the chasers, who'd just landed, Ron had directed his friends to take up a flanking position on the Slytherin team. No one had wands out yet, but if anything started they'd be in a position to hit the green robes from the side, with no worries about friendly fire. *Evidently Ron did read that book on war games and small unit tactics*, Harry mused, *he put up such a fuss about extra reading that I began to wonder if he would.*

Flint smirked at Wood. "I've got a note right here..." and he read off the note from Snape usurping their field reservation because they needed to train their new seeker... Draco Malfoy,

When the Slytherin team unveiled their Nimbus Two Thousand and One brooms – a gift from Lucius, Harry decided to take this whole encounter in a different direction. He fell to his knees, laughing.

Wood looked alarmed, and Harry noticed Fred and George moving behind him. Harry pointed a shaking finger at Draco, which the blond boy slapped away as his face purpled.

"Oh bloody hell Flint, you got screwed. You actually agreed to take Malfoy as your Seeker? Bwahahaha!"

"What the hell is wrong with your Seeker, Wood?" Flint snarled, though his eyes began to look a little uneasy.

"Sorry," Harry chuckled before snorting as he slowly rose to his feet. "I guess you didn't know. Draco here is dead useless on a broom. He's been flying for years, according to him, and the first time I mount a broom I fly rings around him. I don't think a free set of brooms is worth forfeiting the next six Quidditch Cups."

Draco's team-mates began to eye him warily. "That filthy half-blood is lying!" the boy snarled. He tried to kick Harry, but only managed to ram his shin into the Gryffindor's heel when he blocked.

As Draco hobbled backward Harry produced a nasty grin. "Tell you what; I'll put my money where my mouth is. If Draco EVER beats me to the Snitch in a real match, I'll buy you another set of brooms myself."

"Pretty big talk coming from such a tiny little beggar," Flint said, smirking at Wood.

"The best players don't ride the broom like a walrus perched on a toothpick," Oliver observed coolly.

"Why don't we head down to the lake," Harry said. "The air here smells a bit... off."

With a little work, they were able to transfigure some sticks into regulation-sized goals and continued their practice by the lake. Harry's friends sat under a tree and watched them fly... and coincidentally kept an eye out for anyone a little too interested in what the team was doing.

As they walked back to the changing rooms, Oliver kept glancing at Harry. "Do they always follow you around like that?" he asked.

Harry nodded. "Ever since someone jinxed my broom at my first match."

"Someone what?" Wood shouted.

Harry just raised his eyebrows. "It's not a big deal. I just kept dispelling it until they gave up."

"But what if the Snitch appeared while you were busy? That's cheating!"

Harry laughed. "Don't ever change Oliver. Anyway, Malfoy and his little buddies would love to catch any of us alone, so we're pretty



careful about that. Especially practices, because everyone knows where I am.”

Oliver nodded, frowning.

“You ever think about setting up a reserve team?” Harry asked.

“We’ve tried it before, but there aren’t a lot of people that are willing to practice if there isn’t a guarantee they’ll get to play.”

“I see. But it’s a good way to break in new players, isn’t it?”

“Aye, it is. You have some people in mind?”

“Well, Ron is a decent Keeper, and we discovered Ginny is-“

“Oy!” a voice shouted from behind them. “George and I do NOT need to be reminded of that.”

“Indeed we do not, brother of mine. Being schooled by your wee little sister at Quidditch is NOT a happy memory.”

“Is she really that good?” Oliver asked doubtfully.

Gred and Forge sped up until they were flanking them. “Seriously?” George asked. “If our lasses weren’t a well-oiled scoring machine, I think she could easily start at Chaser.”

Oliver looked thoughtful. “You know, it wouldn’t hurt to have someone on hand, in case of an injury.”

“Same goes for your spot, oh fearless leader,” Fred quipped.

“Spot on!” George agreed, “Ickle Ronnikins isn’t so ickle anymore. He keeps growing like he is he’ll be able to block two hoops at the same time.”

“Let me talk to Professor McGonagall about it,” Oliver said.

After they cleaned up, Harry and the rest paid a visit to Hagrid. The groundskeeper didn’t think much of Draco buying his way onto the Slytherin team with a new set of brooms, and he echoed Harry’s low

opinion of Lockhart. Neville was impressed with Hagrid's pumpkin patch and they compared notes on compost mixtures. Luna just sat and silently stared at Hagrid almost the entire time, much to Ginny's amusement.

"Well, ye are a quie' one, aren' ye?" Hagrid asked her, chuckling.

"I'm sorry, but I'd never met a half-giant before," she replied. "You don't really live up to the reputation though, you are much too nice."

Harry was fairly sure he could have dropped a pin and made everyone jump.

"I, er, I, uh," was all Hagrid could say.

"I'm sure she didn't mean it," Hermione said quickly.

"You don't think he's nice?" Luna asked her, "He seems very nice to me."

Hagrid's reaction left no room to doubt Luna's assessment. "I think half-giant means just about as much as being a half-blood," Harry said. "It's just a label, nothing more."

"Well, yeah," Ron agreed. "But Harry, people, well... Giants have a bit of a reputation, you know."

"Some varieties of Muggles think wizards and witches are inherently evil, too," Harry countered

"Harry, I think what Ron means is that people would react very badly if they found out Hagrid wasn't just a very large man. Even though we know better."

Harry shrugged. "I don't want to make trouble for you, Hagrid, but it really doesn't matter what people call you. You're still the same person to me."

The rest of them all agreed and Hagrid got a bit sniffely after that. He blew his nose on an oversized handkerchief, loosening all their teeth

with the racket. They agreed to keep quiet about it; though Harry knew there might be problems later.

As they walked back to the castle, Hermione stunned them all by asking a question about Quidditch. "Is having an older broom really a handicap?"

"Well," Ron answered immediately, "it depends on how old. Most of the team has Cleansweep fives, and against a late-model Nimbus, there's a definite disadvantage, both in speed and manoeuvrability. The Nimbus also has superior acceleration, which is paramount for Seekers and Chasers."

Everyone stared at Ron for a moment. He blinked. "What?" the red-head finally asked.

"Professor Quidditch," Hermione said, patting his arm fondly. "That was exactly what I needed to know. I think the Gryffindor team needs new brooms, don't you?" she asked, looking at Harry.

Harry frowned. "I don't know how expensive that would be, but I don't think Professor McGonagall would let me—"

"I don't think it's a question of paying," Hermione said with a smile. "Let me talk to her and see if she'll agree."

"All right," Harry replied. He knew that when Hermione came up with a scheme, she usually preferred to not unveil it until she'd worked out all the bugs. It was usually more impressive that way, and she wasn't that far away from the shy ten year old that didn't have any friends.

Monday morning, Harry was eagerly awaiting the arrival of the owl post. He happily paid for his reserved copy of the Daily Prophet. The story was exactly where he expected it to be, on the front page.

*Boy Who Lived Speaks!*

*-By Rita Skeeter*

*Harry Potter is very angry young man. It isn't because his parents were lost on one horrible Halloween night. It's because the man who*

*betrayed them to He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named went free. And an innocent man was condemned without a trial. It's enough to make the boy who saved us from the Dark Lord wonder why he bothered...*

Harry whistled as he read. Rita stuck to the plan, for the most part, but she did make a few small changes. She had a natural gift for invective and wasn't afraid to use it. He imagined the Ministry bore some resemblance to a kicked over ant hill right now.

His agreement with the reporter was fairly straightforward. Harry had access to information that few people did, and she made her living spreading information. He would provide her with exclusives from time to time that he would be willing to swear were factual. If a story came up that involved him, Harry promised to give her the first interview. In return, she would present the information in the manner he wished, and didn't go digging for more. Since Harry wasn't speaking to any other members of the fourth estate, it wasn't a bad deal for her. He also promised not to tell anyone about her Animagus form – though he also refused to tell her how he knew.

Mr. Weasley knew this was coming, so he would be ready if there was an inquiry at work. Fortunately, the capture of Pettigrew had nothing to do with his official duties, so it would be hard to censure him for Harry's words. And if someone did come down on him, Rita might have a follow-up story.

While his legal guardian enjoyed his work in the Misuse of Muggle Artefacts office, it wouldn't break Harry's heart if the man found other employment. It was, after all, in the discharge of his duties that he was stabbed and fatally poisoned by Lucius Malfoy. There were two long-term courses of action open to Harry to prevent this. The first involved Arthur no longer working for the Ministry. The second involved him advancing to the point where he was no longer on the front lines.

While Harry was more than happy to help the man in any way possible, he was less than sanguine about sabotaging his career. The only thing forestalling the wrath of Harry's conscience was the fact that Arthur said he didn't care about his career as long as Sirius'

freedom was on the line. It amazed Harry that some people considered Arthur Weasley 'weak' or 'hen-pecked'.

Harry passed around the article as soon as he was done. Ron let out a low whistle when he finished. "Typical Ministry incompetence carried to an unconscionable degree? Why doesn't she tell us how she really feels?"

"She does not sound like someone I'd like to be on the bad side of," Hermione agreed.

*You don't know the half of it,* Harry thought with a smirk.

Their next class, Defence against the Dark Arts, did not really improve under Lockhart's stewardship. As sort of a nasty sport, they had taken to studiously reading every chapter before it was to be covered. Once they were in class, they began to ask rather pointed questions, pressing Professor Lockhart for more details on how he defeated the assorted menaces.

Hermione, who might still have been holding some faint hope that he wasn't a complete fraud, took to this with a will. Ironically, she was also the most adept at picking apart his explanations. They were never directly confrontational, but by the end of class Lockhart was usually sweating. In a twisted way, they did learn a few things about dealing with Dark creatures – after all, the accounts in his books *were* drawn from the memories of the people who actually did the deeds. When they asked a question that obviously hadn't been asked during his interviews, Lockhart's fabrications were painfully obvious. They got a little education, along with torturing the ponce, so their time wasn't completely wasted.

When Lockhart asked Harry to stay after class though, it wasn't to talk about their questions.

"Harry, Harry, Harry... I warned you that you'd need my expert guidance."

"I'm not sure I understand what you're talking about, sir."

"I read the article in today's Prophet. Very dramatic, and it got you on the front page, but dabbling in politics... it can't be good for your career in the long term."

"My career, sir?" Harry decided to hold himself as stiff and formal as possible. It wouldn't do to lose control of his temper and tell this strutting peacock what he really thought.

"As a celebrity. I'm glad to see you are finally realizing the truth of my words but this... it doesn't do to make too many enemies, Harry. Especially this early in the game. Politicians have long memories and you can sacrifice too many opportunities. Now, I've taken the liberty of crafting a masterful retraction for you." With that he picked up a parchment covered with lavender ink. "Just sign this and I'll send it off to my press agent to distribute and you can put this nasty blunder behind you. He's agreed to take care of this, free of charge, if you'll consent to have lunch with us this weekend. He's found this wonderful little café that's opened near—"

Having already bit back his first three responses, Harry interrupted, "I'm sorry, sir, but I had to give Ms. Skeeter a signed affidavit regarding the facts before she would print the article. I don't think a retraction would hold much water."

Lockhart frowned. "You poor boy! I had no idea you were such a babe in the woods. You should never, ever, agree to something like that," he said, wagging his finger. "It's almost impossible to say you were misquoted if you do that!"

"That doesn't really matter to me, sir. I only gave her that information because I want my Godfather released."

"A man you've only met one time?"

"Because he was imprisoned for something he didn't do!" Harry snapped, his temper fraying.

Lockhart sighed. "Harry, this obsession with right and wrong is definitely going to hurt your career."

“Thank you for your concern, professor. I need to leave or I’m going to be late for my next class.”

Lockhart waved him off, but he was still late for transfiguration. McGonagall scowled and told him to see her after class.

Harry was so infuriated that first pebble he transfigured into a rubber ball ended up covered with wicked looking spikes and suspicious-looking rusty brown stains. Hermione raised her eyebrows at him but didn’t say anything.

She did, however, lag behind after class when Harry marched up to Professor McGonagall’s desk.

“I’m sorry I was late, professor, but Professor Lockhart kept me after his class.” Harry was less than successful in keeping the frustration out of his voice.

McGonagall raised an eyebrow at him. “I was not aware you were having difficulties in Defence against the Dark Arts, Mr. Potter.”

“I’m not, Ma’am. No more than anyone else. He wanted to talk to me about the article in the Prophet, and how I need to manage my career as a celebrity.”

Hermione muffled a sigh, but McGonagall’s lips just got the tiniest but thinner. “I see. Well, it is somewhat in connection with that status that I wanted to see you today. Ms. Granger has informed me of the recent... donation... made to the Slytherin house team. She has an idea for how to address that, but she wanted my approval before speaking to anyone on the team. While I appreciate her discretion, I felt that you should be the next to hear this idea. Ms. Granger?”

Hermione bit her lip. “Well Harry, as you know, Muggle athletes will sometimes get endorsement contracts with companies that manufacture sporting goods or clothing. I was thinking perhaps we could write to Nimbus and see if they’d be willing to supply last year’s Quidditch champions with new brooms. In exchange, they could take pictures of the team in their robes, holding the cup, riding on their brooms... The advertising would more than make back their costs, I’d

think.” She hesitated. “Especially with that whole Boy Who Lived thing.”

Harry blinked. “That’s utterly brilliant... Oliver’s going to kiss you when he hears this!”

Hermione turned bright red.

Harry chuckled, thinking of Draco’s reaction. He’d always claimed Harry was a show-off, now to make him suffer for it... “One thing,” Harry said as he thought about Hermione’s last words, “Make sure they only use pictures of all of us together. I don’t mind being in it, but I want this to be about the team, not me. It took all of us to win that cup, and Oliver wants to play professionally after he graduates.”

Hermione nodded eagerly. “I’ll start writing the letter today.”

“I’ll speak to the Headmaster about using the Quidditch Cup in the photographs,” McGonagall said, “but I don’t think that will be a problem. This is an ingenious solution to a vexing inequity, Ms. Granger - ten points to Gryffindor.”

Hermione was practically skipping as they left the classroom.

When she explained the plan to the rest of them at lunch, Ron embarrassed himself by yelling “That’s BRILLIANT!” at the top of his lungs. The normal meal-time chatter ground to a halt as everyone in the Great Hall stared at the Gryffindor table. Harry suppressed a laugh as Ron ducked his head down. Hermione’s face was just as scarlet, but for a different reason.

That night, Harry was feeling particularly confident, so he decided to work on something he’d been putting off. After everyone was asleep, he opened up his trunk and dug out the Diary he’d concealed in the bottom.

Settling back down on his bed, Harry pulled out his quill and began writing.

“Dear Diary, my name is Harry Potter.”



The ink absorbed into the page and reappeared in a new configuration: "Hello Harry, my name is Tom."

Harry felt a chill race down his spine. Sitting there in his hands was a piece of Voldemort's soul, one of the anchors that let him live on after the killing curse rebounded in his face.

"Hello Tom, I've never seen a diary that wrote back to me before. How were you made?"

"I don't remember Harry. It must be magic though. Are you a wizard?"

And so it went for the better part of an hour. The diary deflected any questions about itself or how it was made, while Harry avoided giving it any details. Harry finally gave it up as a bad job. He bade it good night and closed the cover, frowning.

*This thing is both self-aware and cagey, he mused. I was hoping I could get some information out of it regarding how it was created and how Tom planned to create the other Horcruxes. I don't know all the details, let alone how to destroy the ring without losing a hand, but I don't think I'll be getting much help here.*

With that, he threw on a dressing gown and quietly left the dormitory. The common room was deserted, the fireplace banked to ward off the chill from the stone walls.

Making sure the couches and squashy chairs were unoccupied, Harry made his way to the fire. If the destruction of the diary made any disturbance, hopefully it would be chalked up to normal Hogwarts weirdness or blamed on Peeves. Harry leaned forward and tossed the diary onto the fireplace, then jumped back.

Some sparks shot up as embers were knocked loose from the burning log. Flames licked around the cover, but the faded leather didn't darken. Harry stared in disbelief for several minutes before he picked up the fireplace poker. He jammed the diary down into the hot coals but it still refused the catch. He ground the poker into the front cover, but it remained unmarred.

Finally, Harry gave up and hooked the spine of the book and pulled it out of the fire. He left it in front of the hearth to cool as he hung the poker back up. A few minutes later the still-warm diary was back in the bottom of his locked trunk and Harry was staring up at the canopy over his bed.

Sleep did not come easily that night.

Over the next few days, the Daily Prophet carried several stories related to the imprisonment of Sirius Black. The first was an outright denial that the whole mess was being covered up. According to 'sources within the Department of Magical Law Enforcement', an unregistered Animagus had indeed been captured. However, the wizard was reported to be unidentified and in a highly disturbed mental state. He reportedly would not stay in his human form unless stunned, which complicated the identification process.

After that, the inevitable counter-attacks on Harry began. A 'senior ministry official' speculated to another reporter (not Rita, of course – she knew better than to annoy the goose that produced such golden eggs) that Harry was delusional, and seeking to free Black out of some misplaced sense of guilt over his parents' deaths. That remark led to Harry gouging a chip out of his breakfast plate.

By the end of the week, other publications had taken up the torch. Friday morning, Luna received a thick rolled-up newspaper from an owl. She read it, smiled dreamily, and handed it to Harry. It was folded open to a specific article.

Evidently The Quibbler was getting into the act, and featured a historical piece on Sirius's imprisonment, pointing out the many irregularities in how his case was tried – or rather wasn't. What surprised Harry was the straightforward and non-fanciful nature of the article. It had a clear time-line of the events, a well-written legal breakdown, and not a single mention of Crumple-Horned Snorkacks. Harry just stared at Luna.

"I told father about the article," she said. "He doesn't normally like to carry stories like this, but he's annoyed at the Ministry for suppressing his expose about their secret alliance with the Vampire clans."

Harry didn't even react, he just handed the paper to Hermione when she began to sputter. Ron muffled a suspicious-sounding cough as Ginny elbowed him.

"That was a nice thing to do," Neville said quietly.

Luna turned toward him, her eyes seeming to look right past him. Neville cleared his throat. "The five of you have acted much nicer than anyone else I've ever met. It's very strange not being treated as a freak, but I think I prefer it." She went back to eating her breakfast as Neville just gaped at her.

"This is really well-researched," Hermione said in a subdued tone. Harry supposed she felt compelled to offer an olive branch. She'd been less than interested the last couple of times Luna had shown her an article from her father's newspaper.

Luna turned and cocked her head at Hermione. "It's not very interesting, I suppose, but public service announcements seldom are."

"Public service announcements?" Ginny asked her friend. Sharing classes had brought the girls even closer together.

"The public should know what sorts of people are running the Ministry, shouldn't they? You would think the Vampire Alliance would install smarter puppets though." Luna asked in an absent-minded tone before she resumed eating.

On Saturday, Oliver delayed their normal practice until after the photographers had captured the Gryffindor Lions in all their glory. The men from the Nimbus Racing Broom Company were there as well, and were rather excited about the whole thing. One man did ask Harry to autograph a proof for his son, which made him a little uncomfortable. The Boy Who Lived sucked it up and smiled as he wrote, but then passed the photograph to Oliver and the rest of the team to sign it as well. The man chuckled as he received the picture back, but he also nodded to Harry as if to say he understood.

Oliver was so happy about the new brooms that he even let them slack off for the rest of the practice. In truth, they all needed to do

some casual flying to get used to the new brooms. The Weasley Twins were especially exuberant; Oliver forced them to stay serious throughout the photography session on pain of death, or worse – expulsion from the team. Now they were seeing exactly how fast their new brooms could go as they buzzed the stands.

The icing on the cake, however, came the following Monday. Nimbus had a very large advertisement on the third page of the Daily Prophet. It featured a picture of the Gryffindor Lions, lined up with their brooms and looking very serious, with the caption “Nimbus Racing Brooms – Proud Sponsors of the Gryffindor Lions, 1992 Quidditch Cup Champions!”

Oliver posed with Fred and George on either side of him, not trusting to let them out of his sight. It worked for the most part. But every so often, one of the twins in the photograph would smirk and reaching back, use two fingers to put ‘rabbit ears’ on Oliver.

If Oliver was upset by this, he didn’t show it. Harry supposed he was used to them by now.

Draco Malfoy, however, was a bit more demonstrative. He stomped up behind Harry and threw his newspaper down on the table, narrowly missing the bacon. “Who the hell do you think you are, Potter?”

“I think you just answered your own question, Malfoy,” Harry replied coolly as he turned back to his plate.

“He’s just mad that the playing field got levelled,” Ron observed sagely. “Now he actually might have to rely on his own skills, and he’s terrified.” He was also turned slightly so he could see the blond-haired Slytherin and his omnipresent bodyguards.

“At least I’m on a team,” Draco sneered.

“Bought your way on, rather,” Hermione corrected him.

“Defending your... boyfriend, Granger? I supposed your sort would have to settle for a pauper.”

Ginny immediately grabbed Ron's arm. The last thing they needed was an altercation with all the professors at the high table watching. Draco scowled and Harry knew the boy was hoping for more of a reaction. Harry glanced over at the Slytherin table. While Crabbe and Goyle were flanking Draco as usual, some of the other young snakes were watching to goings-on at the Gryffindor table. Many of them had their hands in their pockets.

Draco must have been disappointed by the lack of reaction, because he switched targets. "I see you've recruited Loony Lovegood for your little band of misfits, Potter. What's the matter, Lovegood? Do you have no sense at all, or are you just that pathetically desperate for friends?"

"Shut up Malfoy!" Neville snarled. The normally soft-spoken boy's voice echoed through the Great Hall. "She's worth ten of you!"

Harry felt a chill go down his spine. *That was downright peculiar, hearing that come out of Neville's mouth.*

Luna just smiled absently at Draco, which seemed to provoke him even more.

"Nothing to say, Lovegood? Lost your tongue? Or... lost your mind?" At the last part, Draco gave Neville a nasty leer.

Harry watched as the blood drained out his friend's face. In a flash Neville was standing, then he leaped onto the table, stepping on a platter of scrambled eggs. The next instant he was airborne, and landed on Draco Malfoy like a ton of bricks, slamming the boy to the floor. Neville's elbows were working like pistons and he pounded Draco's face several times before Crabbe and Goyle even thought to do anything. Several Slytherin students jumped up with wands in their hands, but Neville and his target were out of their line of sight. Harry palmed his wand while Ron grabbed Goyle's leg before he could kick Neville in the head.

Things were starting to spiral out of control when Professor Dumbledore's wand let out a noise like a crack of thunder, making everyone jump. Professor Snape was already moving, with

McGonagall half a step behind him. Harry and Ron helped pull Neville to his feet while Crabbe and Goyle belatedly helped their leader.

Draco looked like he'd been run over by a herd of Hippogriffs. One eye was blackened and swelling shut, while the other was blinking and unfocused. Both nostrils were bloody and he had a badly split lip.

Professor Snape took one look at Draco and spun toward the Gryffindors. His wand was in his hand and for an instant Harry thought he was going to hex them. Harry's own wand was in a white-knuckled grip and he was a split second from screaming "Protego!" at the top of his lungs. Being the first to use magic, even a defensive spell, would not help them.

Everything hung in the balance until Snape mastered his rage. "This conduct is inexcusable! Thirty points from Gryffindor and a week's detention, Longbottom."

"He was provoked!" Ron protested. "Malfoy came over here to pick a fight. You're just mad that he got one!"

Snape's face got even redder, but he was cut off before he could say anything.

"While there should not have been any violence, I would like to know what comments precipitated this incident, Mr. Malfoy." Professor Dumbledore's voice was calm, but it nonetheless seemed to carry a slight edge to it.

Draco hesitated. Harry knew that to someone aware of what happened to Frank and Alice Longbottom, Draco's remarks were beyond the pale. They were especially unforgivable since Draco's aunt Bellatrix was one of the ones responsible for their condition, and was serving a life sentence in Azkaban for it. "I'm certain I don't understand what you mean, Headmaster."

Dumbledore nodded slowly, and Harry wondered if he was using Legilimency on the boy. *Not my problem*, Harry concluded wryly. "Very well, Mr. Malfoy," Dumbledore agreed, "If your words were so shameful that you can't repeat them, then I believe that thirty points

should be deducted from Slytherin as well. Don't you agree, Professor Snape?"

"I... see, Headmaster," Snape agreed, looking like he'd just eaten a whole lemon.

"Very well. We should all return to our respective seats before our breakfast is completely cold. Mr. Longbottom, you will report to Professor Sprout after dinner tonight to begin your detention."

Neville coughed. "Yes sir." Harry knew that working for Professor Sprout was far more preferable than whatever Snape would have him doing.

The atmosphere was subdued after that. Neville was looking down at his plate, probably thinking about his parents. Everyone else was trying to make light conversation and not draw any more attention to his reaction, with one exception.

Harry noticed that Luna was staring at Neville. This wasn't one of her usual vacant stares. In fact, she was looking at him quite intently. She seemed to be frowning, which was almost impossible for her. He ate mechanically, watching this unusually focused Luna. Ginny nudged him under the table and he nodded fractionally to indicate he'd noticed. Hermione was still explaining to Ron how Muggle athletes used product endorsements.

Harry pondered Luna's latest behaviour as they left for their morning classes. He was about to tap her on the shoulder and just ask her, an approach which worked about a third of the time, when she murmured something. She was probably just talking to herself, and if Harry had been any farther away he would undoubtedly have missed her whispering, "At least I won't have to change my initials."

Harry tripped on the stairs and almost crashed into her.

He cleared his throat as he recovered. He smiled as Ginny dragged a very distracted Luna off to their morning class. *Well, he mused, Neville might not have slain a dragon, but he did pound the crap out of a Draco.*

A/N:

Bit of a delay on updates due to illness (as was reported on yahoo group viridiandreams). Feeling better now and advancing the plot.

Plot discussions and Q&A will be addressed on my yahoo group (viridiandreams, see my author profile for the link), as I have been warned that excessive author notes are a no-no.

Thanks for reading!

-Matthew



## Chapter 21

That evening Neville received a hero's welcome in the Gryffindor common room, which rather embarrassed him. Percy, however, proved to be the exception to the rule. The Weasley prefect seemed to revel in his role as the official killjoy and began berating Neville in front of everyone. This earned Percy some mutinous glares from his housemates, which he ignored.

As Harry watched his friend wilt under Percy's tirade, he finally snapped. "Right!" he snarled as he jumped to his feet and grabbed a handful of Percy's robes. "You and I need to have a little talk, right now!" With that he dragged the taller boy toward the portrait hole.

Percy was a good bit larger than Harry, but when he began to resist, Harry sank down into a deep front stance and continued driving forward. Between Harry's lower centre of gravity and some unexpected leg strength, the prefect was yanked forward off balance. Out in the corridor, Harry brought them to an alcove and spun toward Percy, releasing his rumpled robes.

"All right," Harry said coldly. "You don't like me. That's fine. Everyone is entitled to their opinion. But when you start taking it out on my friends, your license to be an utter prat gets revoked. Do I make myself clear, Percival?"

"You don't tell me how to do my job, Potter," Percy snapped. "Longbottom committed assault in front of the entire school. That sort of conduct is unacceptable for anyone."

Harry sighed disgustedly and shook his head. "Did you ever stop to ask why Neville lost his temper? Do you even care? Or has your self-righteous furore driven the last vestiges of logical thought from your head?"

Percy started to open his mouth, but stopped. He frowned and crossed his arms, glaring down at Harry, waiting.

"Let me tell you a little story, Percy, that started shortly after my parents were murdered," Harry said in a flat voice. "A group of Death Eaters raided the Longbottom house. They were trying to find out

about just what happened to Voldemort because they didn't believe that he'd just disappeared. The Longbottoms were highly respected Aurors, and the Death Eaters reckoned that they knew what was really going on. They used the Cruciatus curse on the Longbottoms until they were driven completely out of their minds. They've been in Saint Mungo's long term care ever since. Neville visits them every so often, but as far as anyone can tell, they don't even know that he's their son."

Percy's face had gone pale as he heard this, but his expression also grew puzzled. "What does this have to do with what happened today?"

"The Death Eaters, who were captured and sentenced to life in Azkaban," Harry continued, "were led by Bellatrix Lestrange, Draco Malfoy's aunt on his mother's side. This morning, when Draco was taunting Luna, he decided to throw in a crack about Luna not being able to talk because she'd lost her mind. Only he was staring at Neville as he said it." Harry nodded in satisfaction when he saw Percy's shocked, angry expression. "Exactly -- in your parent's day, he could have legally challenged Draco to a death duel for making a comment like that."

Percy took a deep breath. "I - I was not fully aware of the circumstances. Neville still needs to control his temper in the future, but I will admit that in this instance he was most seriously provoked." There was an implied apology in his words.

Harry nodded. "I knew you wouldn't have come down on him if you knew all the circumstances." It was a rather backhanded compliment as well. He paused and then stuck out his hand.

Percy frowned for a moment, and then shook it. "I need to talk to Professor McGonagall. You'd better get back to the common room before curfew."

Harry nodded and walked back to the Fat Lady's portrait. When he returned, he found everyone still gathered in the common room, talking excitedly. The twins had set up a betting pool based on, among other things, how many times Harry was going to hex Percy. When Harry returned alone, money immediately began changing

hands. He growled as soon as he understood what was going on. If Percy got wind of this, any progress they'd made would be lost and he'd become even more difficult to deal with.

As he walked over, he noticed the couch was full and began looking for an empty chair. Confrontations of any sort tended to leave him a little drained. It was possible that the non-violent types were even worse, since there was no physical release for his muscular tension. Luna appeared to notice Harry's predicament because she stood up from her seat between Ginny and Neville.

"Hey," Harry objected, "you don't have to-" He shut his mouth when Luna smoothed her robes and then flopped down in Neville's lap. "Never mind – Luna, thanks!" Harry suppressed a grin at the expression frozen on Neville's face. As he sat down, Harry noticed Ginny was stifling a giggle as well.

Harry scratched his head and tried to organize his thoughts. "Look, Percy and I have come to a bit of an understanding. So let's not do anything to muck it up, yeah?" He addressed that mainly toward the twins and Ron, but he noticed Ginny nodding as well, a small smile on her lips. He looked around and noticed most of the Gryffindors were drifting away to attend to their own schoolwork, now that the excitement seemed to be over. "Since we're all here, we should also, er, practice our *homework*, you know."

With that, they all pulled out a book, but soon their eyes were closed rather than open as they began their Occlumency exercises. Harry tested each of them, noting their progress. Ron was a bit steadier and even Ginny was beginning to show some resistance to him. Hermione was frowning and turning her head slightly from time to time, so it seemed like she was testing their friends as well.

Harry had given some thought to what he would do as his friends began to master Occlumency. He could tell them everything individually when their defences grew sure. But the people who were still somewhat open would likely feel excluded to some extent. While those feelings might motivate them to work harder, Harry was loath to do anything that would make his friends feel uncomfortable around himself or each other. There was also the likelihood that they would

feel betrayed when they discovered the truth about him and his manipulations. Bad enough if they decided that they didn't want anything to do with him after that, but to lose them one by one as he told them would be worse. It would also make it harder for them if half of them suddenly hated Harry and couldn't tell the rest of them why.

Besides, it also delayed the inevitable and gave him a little more time with them. After all he'd been through, was a little more time so much to ask?

Harry shook his head to clear it of morbid thoughts. They'd still be alive, and that was why he'd come back, wasn't it? Better Ginny married to Michael Corner or Dean Thomas than lying in that ruined courtyard, tortured to death because of his stupidity. Better to see Ron and Hermione married and making their own lives than dead following Harry on his fool's crusade. Luna and Neville might even have a chance together in this timeline, provided he didn't screw things up too badly. Even if he died taking Voldemort with him, he'd leave behind a much better and happier world. The important thing was making sure the prophecy was fulfilled with Voldemort's destruction. Whatever happened after that would happen. His part would be done and he could rest.

Harry sighed and leaned his aching head forward on his palms as he planted his elbows on his knees. He knew his thoughts were spiralling downward out of control, but sometimes he just got so damn tired of it all. The wheels of fate could grind just as finely as those of justice.

He was about to get up and leave when Ginny put her hand on his shoulder. He jumped a little and turned toward her. She pulled her hand back, but her eyes were questioning. *How did she know I was upset?* Harry wondered, but he just shrugged and gave her a lop-sided smile. He settled back on the cushions as she closed her eyes again. Harry took a deep breath. Clearing his mind was seldom this hard.

The articles about Sirius continued, though they were starting to become less frequent. The Ministry was refusing to divulge any details, and requests by members of the press to interview either

prisoner were denied 'for security reasons'. The reporters were prowling for blood, but the Ministry was still stonewalling them.

Harry and Hermione researched the possibility of simply hiring a lawyer to file an appeal on Sirius' behalf. They were a little shocked at how primitive the appellate system was in the magical world. They couldn't find any clauses that guaranteed a convicted prisoner access to legal counsel. At one time, a wrongly-convicted wizard could challenge his oppressor to a duel to obtain legal redress, but the repeal of the duelling code closed this avenue.

Hermione had to elbow Harry to break him out of a pleasant daydream involving challenging Fudge to a formal duel and kicking the spineless politician's arse in exchange for Sirius' freedom.

The Wizarding legal system seemed to assume that there was no way they could make an error and convict the wrong man. Of course, with all the magical means that existed to get at the truth, it would be difficult for them to get it wrong - provided the accused actually got a day in court. Apparently the de facto imprisonment of Sirius Black was a rather unusual precedent in Wizarding law. That made the powers that be even more culpable for his imprisonment. More importantly, they would likely go to even greater lengths to avoid admitting their error.

"It might be easier to start researching jail-breaks," Harry finally said with a groan one afternoon.

He was a little shocked when Hermione looked thoughtful rather than immediately yelling that he wasn't funny. "I'm starting to wonder if there is a legal means of doing this, if people in the Ministry are going to hold him completely incommunicado," Hermione pondered.

"I'm worried that they have something else planned," Harry muttered.

He thought he might be able to introduce some of what he'd overheard in a way that wouldn't garner suspicion. "I've been thinking about other reasons people might want Sirius locked away. He's now the last of the Blacks, and there is a considerable family fortune being held in trust while he's in Azkaban. He has a cousin, Nymphadora, who's an Auror, but her mother was formally disinherited before she

died. His cousin Bellatrix is in Azkaban as well, but his other cousin Narcissa is Draco's mum."

Hermione's eyes went wide. "So if he dies in prison, Narcissa and the Malfoys would receive the Black inheritance?"

Harry nodded. "They might be afraid to do anything overt to kill him, but between the cold and the Dementors, Azkaban is not a healthy place to be. If he died of something like that, it wouldn't raise as many questions, would it?"

Hermione got a sick look on her face. "Harry, that's horrible!"

"Would you honestly put it past people like Draco's family to bribe the Ministry to guarantee they got his money?"

Hermione looked like she was on the verge of tears as she shook her head.

Harry felt like a heel for asking Hermione to waste her time on the fruitless search, so he and Ron got together with the twins a few nights before her birthday and sent the fourth year students off to Hogsmeade. Harry provided a small stack of galleons and Ron provided a dire threat that he would personally thrash the two of them if her gift was pranked in any way shape or form. Neville was walking by and offered to help with the thrashing – his pounding of Malfoy had given the formerly shy boy a little bit of a swagger when he walked. That of course disappeared when Luna was around. She seemed to make him very nervous for some reason.

The twins winked mysteriously and disappeared soon afterward. Harry knew they were using the Marauder's Map and the secret passage into Honeydukes, so he wasn't really worried about them getting caught. He didn't really want to loan them his invisibility cloak. He wasn't sure he'd ever get it back and letting those pranksters know about it was like showing a pyromaniac where the napalm and matches were stored.

He and Ron were a little nervous as they waited for Fred and George to return. Sometimes their sense of the appropriate was a bit - off.

When they waltzed into the common room, their grins made Harry's stomach drop. One of them nonchalantly tossed a small box to Ron.

"There. Now let's see if we've earned a beating, oh brother of mine," Fred chirped.

"Perhaps we should step back so we'll have a bit of a head start," George said dramatically.

Harry's fears proved unfounded as Ron fumbled the box open. Inside was a golden locket in the shape of a book. It opened to reveal a small mirror and a place to fix a photo. Harry had made a copy of the group shot Colin took of all of them and shrank it down until it fit into the opening.

"Does ickle Harrikins think we need to sleep with one eye open tonight?" Fred asked.

Harry smiled as Ron closed the locket and replaced it in the box. "No, you two have done quite well. I'm almost sorry I doubted you."

"Always do the unexpected, Harry, that's something George and I learned from the Marauders," Fred said in sage-like voice.

"The Marauders?" Harry asked curiously.

"The marvellous, multi-talented pranksters of yesteryear, my good man," George explained in a grand voice. "They attended Hogwarts long before us, but their legacy remains and Fred and I are proud to uphold their traditions of pranking excellence."

"Do you know who they were?" Ron asked.

"No," Fred said shaking his head. "Just their nicknames, Prongs, Padfoot, Moony, and Wormtail."

Harry was tempted for a moment to just tell them that one of their heroes was locked up in Azkaban and then stand back. On the other hand, the Ministry might need that prison again some day.

Ginny and Luna made a card to go with the gift that all of them signed. Ron and Neville felt like they should have contributed more, until Harry pointed out the key role their dire threats played in keeping the twins from buying a locket that turned into a rubber chicken.

Of course, Harry wasn't above manoeuvring things so that Ron was sitting next to Hermione in the common room when Harry nudged the boy and passed him the box with the card.

Ron looked horrified when she opened the locket and promptly burst into tears. He hesitantly patted her arm and assured her if she hated it they could get her something else – he was sure the twins had kept the receipt. Ron yelped when she suddenly grabbed him around the neck in a tight hug.

She let him go after a couple of minutes, sniffing and wiping at her eyes. "I'm sorry," she said shakily. "You must think I'm mental."

"No," Luna said. "You've just never had friends before, have you?"

Hermione's head snapped to the side and she stared at the blond-haired girl.

Luna looked back at her, cocking her head to the side. Harry noticed her right hand was resting on Neville's forearm. "It's not hard to guess. I never had any friends before I came to Hogwarts either. Harry seems to have gathered a lot of interesting people together, hasn't he?"

Harry blinked and swallowed. This Luna was a little more perceptive, or perhaps she was just more open with her perceptions. "Maybe I just recognize quality folk when I see them," he replied in a swotty tone of voice. Everyone laughed at that and Harry felt his stomach unclench.

"Well, I do appreciate this - all of you," Hermione said as she abruptly let go of Ron and flushed. "I - I did have a few friends at school - before - but they only seemed interested in having me help them with their homework."



“And we know how you hate helping people with their homework,” Ron teased.

Hermione snorted and looked away. “I suppose you want to finish that transfiguration essay on your own then?” she asked tartly.

Ron shrugged. “I’ll muddle through.”

Hermione’s head snapped back around and she stared incredulously at Ron.

Ron looked her square in the eyes and responded in a very matter-of-fact tone. “If you have any doubts about whether we’re just being nice to get help, then I’d rather you didn’t help me.” It was one of the calmest and most mature things Harry could remember this version of Ron ever saying.

Hermione had a stricken look on her face. “Ron, I didn’t mean it, not seriously. I was just teasing you back.”

Ron shrugged and smiled faintly. “I know, but I didn’t want there to be any doubt either. You don’t have to buy our friendship, you know.”

Hermione just stared at him. Eventually Harry got a little uncomfortable and turned away, coughing discreetly.

After dinner the next day, Ginny cornered Harry in the hallway outside the Gryffindor common room.

“That was very nice what you did,” she said.

“What I did?”

“I know Ron couldn’t afford that locket,” Ginny said, slouching into a don’t-try-to-fool-me posture.

Harry shrugged, a little uncomfortable. “I supplied the galleons, Ron and Neville ‘persuaded’ the twins to go pick it up with no funny business.”

“But you organized this.”

"Well, she's been spending a lot of time on legal research for Sirius," Harry explained

Ginny nodded. "And then you made sure Ron gave it to her."

Harry grinned, a little sheepishly. Trust Ginny to pick up on that.

"Why are you trying to fix Hermione up with my brother, of all people?"

Harry's heart skipped a beat. He wondered how transparent his manoeuvring was. How long until everyone else started noticing? How long until he was forced to answer some very uncomfortable questions. Harry fidgeted with the neck of his robes, trying not to imagine a noose. "Ron isn't that bad," he said, playing for time.

Ginny frowned up at him. "It's not that, I mean, you two are the smartest out of us. I was just wondering why you didn't - well -" she trailed off, embarrassed to state the obvious conclusion.

*I can't believe I'm having this conversation,* Harry mused as his face burned hot and cold.

"Well I hear you and Luna are doing quite well," he replied.

*Why did I just say that?* He wondered.

"I like Hermione just fine -- as a friend - but we, er, both tend to worry. A lot, you know. Ron's good for that."

"Yeah, he never worries about anything except Quidditch," Ginny agreed, rolling her eyes. She looked left and right down the corridor. "Well, we better get in there before people wonder what happened to us." With that she grabbed Harry's wrist and led him toward the Fat Lady's portrait.

*What the hell was that all about?* Harry wondered, flustered, as she gave the password.

A week later, Sirius Black was in the news again. The Ministry reported that the man had somehow escaped from Azkaban, probably by resorting to the darkest of magic.

Harry sat, stunned, as he read the Daily Prophet.

*...This only shows that the man is truly guilty of the crimes he was charged with," said a senior Ministry official, "and this will hopefully put those ridiculous rumours to rest."*

Harry read the rest of the article, which was basically a re-tread of the recent history of the case. The slant of the article was that as hopes for his release faded, the dark wizard grew desperate and broke out on his own by means of some heretofore unknown magic.

Harry stared down at his plate, lost in thought as the others read the story.

"Well, at least he's out, right Harry?" Ron asked, breaking the uncomfortable silence.

"We only have their word for it," Harry whispered.

Hermione frowned then gasped. "You think they 'disappeared' him?"

Harry nodded.

"They what?" Ron asked.

Hermione gave Harry a worried look before she answered. "I did a report on Latin America when I was in Muggle school," Hermione explained. "People who disagree with the government tend to disappear – no records, no arrests, they just vanish in the middle of the night. Most of them are killed by their own government."

"The Ministry wouldn't do that!" Ron gasped, horrified.

"Ron," Harry said wearily, "you said yourself Draco's dad paid a lot of bribes and was able to stay out of Azkaban. How many people do you think he murdered as a Death Eater?"

“Harry,” Ron hissed, “Dad works there! They wouldn’t - they couldn’t...”

“I don’t think the whole government is corrupt, Ronald,” Hermione said patiently, “and I don’t think Harry is saying that either.”

“But I’m not going to trust blindly if I can help it,” Harry insisted. “I don’t think Mr. Weasley would disagree with that attitude either. Remember how suspicious he was about Auror Shacklebolt being sent to Italy?”

Ron nodded, but his face was still troubled.

“Harry, he might really have escaped too,” Hermione said. “We are making some assumptions here.”

“But why would he escape when people are finally asking questions about his case?” Neville asked.

“We don’t know that he’s even aware of that,” Harry said. “I haven’t been able to see him after that first meeting.” The first time around, it took the realization that Wormtail was travelling to Hogwarts with Harry to get Sirius to risk his soul and try to slip past the Dementors. And with the knowledge that Peter was an Animagus, the guards would be more suspicious of a large dog that suddenly appeared.

Harry walked through the rest of the day in a haze of fear, doubt, and worry. The worst part, of course, was his utter helplessness to do anything about the situation. What the hell was the use of travelling back to the past only to have to watch things get screwed up again in newer and more dramatic fashions? Sirius’ death in his previous life seemed to herald the beginning of the dark days. Was it going to happen even sooner this time? Had all his meddling only accelerated the process? Was the entire magical world in each time line little more than a pile of oil-soaked tinder, waiting for any excuse to catch fire?

Was fate some vindictive harridan that resented his meddling? Was she going to respond by making things go to hell even faster this time around? For the first time in a while, Harry began to entertain the possibility that he really might lose. He wondered if there was any

way he could just take his friends and leave the country, maybe emigrate to the United States or Australia... some place they'd never heard of Voldemort or the damn Prophecy. Of course it would be almost impossible to persuade all the Weasleys to leave the country. Not to mention Hermione's parents, Neville's Gran, and Luna's father. Could he leave Hagrid and the Hogwarts staff to their fates? Did the students outside of Gryffindor not deserve to escape their fate as well?

In short, Harry was well and truly trapped.

Damnation.

That night, Harry's Occlumency exercises did little to quiet his mind. His dreams decided to play a medley of some of his subconscious' greatest hits. He watched Cedric and Sirius die And then Dumbledore. He watched Hermione step in front of a curse meant for Ron; he watched Ron do the same for himself. He watched Hogwarts burn and Ginny die, which was the cruellest of all - he hadn't been there, to his eternal shame, and he couldn't possibly have memories of that horror - but his subconscious decided to fill in the blanks. He saw her torn and battered body lying on the ground, writhing as Draco cursed her. The harsh glow from his wand cast his features in demonic relief as he lowered himself onto her...

Harry awoke to find himself in midair, having sprung from his bed. The canopy ripped loose and was flying across the room as the duvet burst into flames. Harry bit off his scream of rage as he realized he was beyond the silencing charms placed on his bed. He barely managed to tuck his shoulder under as he fell and rolled into a crouch in the middle of the room.

Harry rose shakily to his feet and grabbed his wand off the bedside table. A wave and a muttered charm restored the duvet, and another re-attached the torn canopy. His pyjamas were soaked with sweat and Harry felt like he'd just run a marathon. It took over half an hour under the hottest shower he could stand before the shaking in his hands even started to abate.

Hours later, Harry drove them mercilessly on the morning run. When he sparred with Ron, he nearly cracked his friend's ribs when he was

sloppy with a block. The boy glared at him as he tried to get his wind back.

“You trying to kill me, Harry?”

“You should take this seriously. It might save your life some day,” Harry growled.

Ron frowned. He expected Harry to joke back, not snap at him. “You want to tell me what’s bothering you?”

“I can’t, Ron, not until you learn how to maintain your Occlumency and not let it slip every time you get bored.” Harry’s voice sounded both weary and irritated at the same time.

Ron flinched back like he’d been slapped and Harry abruptly felt ashamed of himself.

“I’m sorry, mate. I had a very, very bad night. But I shouldn’t take it out on you.”

“Better me than the girls, Harry. I, at least, won’t hex you for it.” He cuffed Harry on the shoulder and they resumed sparring.

Ron’s remark reminded Harry of something though. He cut the martial arts practice short and led them back out to the lake at a quick jog.

Soon they were standing on the shore as Harry gathered a small pile of stones.

“All right. We’re going to work on some slightly more serious spells than you’ll see in Lockhart’s classroom. The cutting charm is call ‘Diffindo’, and you use it with a whipping motion like this,” he said as he demonstrated. “Visualize a very sharp wedge of force emanating from the end of your wand. Now, to start, we’re going to practice just casting it into the water near the shore. The merpeople are out in the deep water, so we won’t risk hurting anyone. Any questions?”

“Is this what you used to kill that troll?” Ron asked.

“Yeah. Its hide was pretty tough though. I had to wait for Neville to get it to open its mouth before I could really hurt it.” Harry replied as he noticed Hermione frowning.

Harry had to demonstrate the wand motion a couple of times for Ginny and Luna before they were confident they had it down.

After that, as Harry led the count, they practiced casting the spell at the unresisting water. As the spells discharged into the surface of the lake, small plumes of water shot into the air. Harry noticed that his spells were creating noticeably larger splashes than the others, so he began focusing less and less when he cast.

Once they were all comfortable with the spell. Harry began tossing rocks into the air in front of them as he counted. At first, none of them could strike a small, moving target. But with practice, they improved. Ginny was the first to strike a glancing blow. Then Hermione pulverized the next, followed by Ron and Neville scoring a simultaneous hit. Luna squinted fiercely, but still had problems connecting as the others improved.

When Harry ran out of rocks, Ron and Neville helped him gather more. Hermione, however, was talking to Luna and pointing toward the Quidditch pitch. “Luna,” she asked, “how many of the goal hoops can you make out from here?”

Luna frowned at Hermione. “You can see the hoops?”

Hermione nodded and held up her fingers in front of Luna’s face. “I want you to watch my fingers and tell me when they start to get blurry.” She began to back away from the younger girl.

When she was about twenty feet away Luna spoke up. “All I can see now is the hand, not the individual fingers.” She held up her own hand. “You can see my fingers from there?”

“Quite easily,” Hermione replied. “It appears you are a little nearsighted.”

“Oh,” Luna said tonelessly. “I was hoping I could hold out for farsighted.”

“Well,” Hermione continued like she hadn’t heard anything, “that would explain why you were having so much trouble with the moving targets, but can still read fine.”

Hermione prevailed upon Harry to end the practice so they could have an early breakfast. After they showered and ate, Hermione dragged Luna off to Madam Pomfrey before the first class period began. At lunch time, Luna was sporting an elegant pair of silver wire-frame glasses that framed her pale blue eyes. The first year witch was frowning as she began eating.

“It may be a little uncomfortable at first, but Madam Pomfrey said that should pass,” Hermione reassured her.

“I think they look rather unattractive,” Luna said as she fiddled with the string of butterbeer corks around her neck.

“Harry’s got glasses and he looks all right,” Ginny quickly reassured her.

Luna stared across the table at Ginny, cocking her head. “Harry is a *boy*. It’s all right if *he* looks unattractive.”

Harry opened his mouth to say something but stopped, as he didn’t have a clue as to what he could say in response. Ginny surreptitiously patted his leg under the table. Harry turned toward her thinking just how he could tell either girl that he didn’t care if his glasses made him look unattractive, but finally just gave it up as a bad job all around.

Luna turned toward Neville, who appeared to be doing his best to stay out of the whole discussion. “What do you think? Do these glasses look unattractive?”

Neville frowned and swallowed. “I think they look very nice on you, Luna,” he said sincerely.

“Oh,” Luna said. She shrugged. “That’s all right then.” She patted the nervous boy on the arm and began eating her lunch. “At least it might be easier to spot a crumple-horned Snorkack if father gets the chance to travel this summer.”



Harry appreciated the distraction his friends provided him from his worries, but his sleep grew increasingly disturbed. They added spell-casting drills to their daily routine and began getting up half an hour earlier. Harry showed them a variety of nasty curses and hexes, all of which were potentially lethal or capable of knocking someone down and keeping them down.

As they worked together, Harry became increasingly aware of the difference between spells he cast and those his friends cast. It was especially apparent when they were casting Reducto spells into the surface of the lake. His friends' spells were throwing up geysers of white water at the point of impact. The largest of these was over six feet tall, but Harry was matching it even while he was withholding most of his power.

He was pondering Healer Stanhope's words about his MaRI test results when he started counting out loud again. Their volleys set off another set of geysers each time he counted. Evidently Ron had been trying to say something because he suddenly grabbed Harry's shoulder. Startled, Harry accidentally pushed all his magic down his arm into the outstretched wand.

The wood bucked hard in Harry's grip and the light that flew toward the lake seemed to be almost a solid mass. There was a loud thump as a column of water two feet wide and over thirty feet tall exploded upward from the surface of the lake. Harry barely had time to close his eyes before they were drenched with cold, fishy-smelling water. Someone let out a squeal and he was sure he heard a fairly vile curse or two.

When he'd knuckled the muddy water out of his eyes, Harry saw stunned fish begin floating belly up in the agitated water. He turned toward Ron, who was blinking rapidly. Hermione looked shocked, but Ginny was red-faced from holding back either laughter or tears.

Ron finally found his voice. "I was going to ask if we were about done. I wanted to make sure I had time to take a shower before breakfast."

"I think Harry saved you some time there," Ginny said before she sank to her knees, laughing uproariously.

Harry nervously scanned the Daily Prophet each morning at breakfast, but the only word his daily ritual yielded about Sirius consisted of vague rumours and alleged appearances in the unlikeliest of places. Harry had yet to read a “Black Sighting” that didn’t sound like a complete hoax.

On the other hand, Molly wrote that Aurors had stopped by The Burrow several times, supposedly to interview her and Arthur. However, they seemed to be more interested in looking around the house than talking to anyone. Molly also saw several new faces in the village when she went to do her shopping.

Harry was also interviewed by several Ministry officials at the school, though Professor McGonagall insisted on attending these meetings in her capacity as his head of house. Though he didn’t think it truly necessary, Harry was amused to observe the quelling effect his stern protector had on the Auror who was evidently assigned the role of ‘bad cop’. It certainly didn’t help when Minerva reminded the man that he’d gotten much lower marks in her classes than Harry.

After they left, Harry thanked her politely and informed her that if she ever wanted to hold a workshop on how to discreetly intimidate people that she could easily fill the Great Hall. Professor McGonagall’s thin lips did not curl when she raised an arched eyebrow, but she did say “Indeed,” with a hint of warmth.

October brought damp and chilly weather, forcing them to bundle up for their morning exercises. Hermione found a water-repelling charm in the library that made her extremely popular with her classmates.

Harry was especially grateful for her discovery as he returned from Quidditch practice the first weekend of the month. The new brooms were the only bright spot in the day. Oliver’s enthusiasm was not dampened by the elements, and so he drove them mercilessly. Harry was secretly amused to note that they were practicing just as hard as they had in his previous reality, when they hadn’t won the Quidditch Cup his first year.

He did try and talk his friends out of escorting him to and from practice, but Ron was having none of it. Ron was convinced that Draco and his cronies were just biding their time. Harry would have

argued that he was going to extremes, but he knew that in the future that sort of thinking would be necessary, so he bit his tongue.

As they re-entered the castle, Harry saw Nearly Headless Nick drift by muttering to himself and the Boy Who Lived remembered the events that led to him attending the Gryffindor house ghost's Deathday Party.

Having no great desire to smell a lot of rotting food, or obtain proof that Mr. Filch was a squib, Harry stopped dead in his tracks and quickly cleaned himself using the Scourgify charm. Harry nodded toward Mrs. Norris, who'd just rounded the corner, and directed his friends to clean themselves up before the cantankerous caretaker caught up with his cat. He directed a few cleansing charms at the water puddled on the floor as well.

When Argus rounded the corner, he found a lot of slightly damp students standing on a suspiciously clean section of flagstones. The bitter old man heartily disapproved of any sort of cleaning magic as effeminate and dishonest. Cleanliness should only be obtained by hard work, he claimed, and didn't hesitate to punish anyone he found using spells to speed things up. He really despised house elves, Harry knew, no matter that their efforts were the only thing that allowed Hogwarts to function as it did. Fortunately, the man's lack of magical ability also made it difficult for him to punish anyone when the offence didn't happen right in front of him. So he merely scowled as he brushed past them.

They all laughed about the close call during dinner that night. When asked what had tipped him off, Harry said he saw Mrs. Norris watching them enter the Great Hall out of the corner of his eye.

Ron growled. "That mangy beast tries to get everyone in trouble. I'd like to give her a good kick if she ever stopped moving close by."

"Ronald!" Hermione sniffed. "I thought having your own cat would give you a little more empathy for other peoples' pets."

"Crookshanks can't stand Mrs. Norris either, Hermione. He gets along fine with the village strays, but every time he sees her he starts snarling - probably because she's Filch's narsty ickle spy."

Hermione just sighed and shook her head. It was hard to disagree since Crookshanks did go out of his way to warn Mrs. Norris from coming anywhere near the Gryffindor tower. The kneazle-cross was several times the size of the other cat, so the warnings were quite effective, making Ron's familiar very popular with the twins and other housemates.

The Halloween Feast was quite spectacular. Hagrid's pumpkins had grown enormous, and Professor Flitwick had proven to be quite an artist when it came to carving absolutely terrifying visages into the rinds. After a couple of first year Hufflepuff girls fainted dead away when a life-size giant's head snapped at them, Harry concluded that animating the jack-o-lanterns had been just a bit over the top.

Of course Harry wondered if the frightening decorations were the sole reason Luna was holding onto an even more nervous Neville's arm.

The food was incredible, of course, but Harry found himself losing his appetite. Worrying about things he had no control over was a singularly useless occupation. Harry knew this. But he couldn't stop himself from stewing about his godfather. He sat there staring at his plate for a few moments, and then jumped when a fork deposited a slab of rare roast beef on the plate, followed by a wedge of steak-and-kidney pie. He frowned at Ginny, who was matter-of-factly loading his plate with all of his favourite dishes.

"Starving yourself isn't going to help anyone," she whispered tersely. If the others even noticed what she was doing, they gave no indication of it.

"I know," Harry said, sighing. "I'm just..."

"You're worried about him. But Harry, you're not Merlin. If you find a way to help him, I'm sure you will. But until then, you need to take care of yourself. If you run yourself into the ground, you might get the opportunity to help him, but be unable to act on it." She said this very calmly as she cut up her steak.

"How did you get so smart?" Harry asked in an amused tone.

"I cheated."

Harry blinked. "You cheated?"

"I wrote Mum. She's rather good at lecturing people." Ginny cocked her head and looked at him sidelong. "Would you rather hear it from me now, or get an overdose of it when we go home for holidays?"

"Er, from you."

Ginny nodded and smiled. "Good answer, Potter."

*It's rather frightening, he mused as he ate his dinner, how well she can read me. Was she always this perceptive? And was I just too incredibly stupid to notice?*

The day of the match against Slytherin was damp and muggy, which Harry supposed was an improvement over the 'pouring water out of a boot' rain that had dominated the previous month.

Harry ate a modest breakfast before going out to get suited up. He wasn't nearly as bad as he used to be, when he often couldn't eat at all before a match, but he still felt vaguely nauseous when the adrenalin started to flow.

"All right, we've got an absolute parity of brooms," Oliver told them during his pre-game pep-talk. He ignored the fact that Harry was still mounted on his Nimbus Two Thousand, since the Two Thousand and One wasn't that big an improvement and he was intimately familiar with the quirks of the broom he'd flown for over a year. "We've trained harder than anyone," Oliver continued, ignoring the grumbles that followed that statement. The fact of the matter was that he'd driven the team mercilessly since the day they received their new brooms. "And we want it worse than they do," he growled and then turned toward Harry. "You made some big claims about beating Malfoy to the Snitch," Wood growled. "Now you need to make good on them. Get the Snitch or die trying!"

"No pressure, Harry," Fred said, winking. George rolled his eyes and made a face behind Oliver's back.

Harry cracked his knuckles in an overly dramatic fashion that had the twins chuckling. "The Snitch isn't in question. What I want to see is if I can make Draco piss himself before I catch it."

Oliver stared at him for a long moment before echoing Harry's feral grin. "Right. Good lad! Now let's go, Lions!" he roared as he led them out onto the pitch.

Without Dobby's rogue Bludger to distract him, Harry made sure Draco had a very long afternoon. The Slytherin seeker zipped around the pitch a few times, calling Harry 'Scarhead' and showing off his new broom. Harry supposed he also wanted to intimidate the Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw players they'd be facing later in the season. According to the grapevine, those houses were less than pleased about the Slytherins and Gryffindors receiving new brooms. Professor Flitwick was working toward cutting a similar endorsement deal with Comet, while Professor Sprout was lobbying the Board of Governors to have the Quidditch matches played on a standard set of brooms provided by the school itself. Harry didn't really care what happened, as long as Slytherin didn't have an overwhelming advantage.

Draco's broom was only marginally faster than Harry's, and the blond Seeker quite obviously couldn't handle it well at full speed. Harry demonstrated this by diving just past the Slytherin player and then flipping over him in a quick barrel roll. Draco couldn't stop himself from flinching back as the red-robed figure flashed past and around him. Harry hauled back on the shaft of his broom and kicked it into a standing stall so he could smirk at his furious counterpart.

"Already frightened, Malfoy? Money not doing you a lot of good up here, is it?" he sneered.

He supposed he was pushing things a little, but the vision of Draco torturing Ginny would not leave him alone. While it was technically possible that something like that had happened, it was more likely just his own fears and frustrations that were torturing him through his nightmares.

Harry's expression suddenly became very keen and he spun his broom and pushed it over into a dive, flashing under Draco in an instant. The Slytherin Seeker didn't hesitate and followed Harry in his

sudden plummet. Harry waited until he was about to strike the turf when he hauled back on his broom with all his might, veering to the side as he pulled out of the suicidal dive. Blades of grass made a whirring sound as the toes of his shoes skimmed through them. Even sweeter sounds were the sudden thud and tumble as Draco hit the ground and bounced into the air.

“Oh, that’s got to sting!” Lee Jordan announced over the enchanted megaphone. “A picture perfect Wronski Feint by Potter and a wonderful example of why little rich boys shouldn’t try to buy their way onto the pitch by Malfoy. Er, sorry, Professor,” the boy concluded, though he didn’t really sound that sorry to Harry.

Ron later told him that Professor McGonagall didn’t look all that irate, either.

Draco shakily took to the air again and Harry began circling him in a distinctly predatory fashion. The circling also meant that Harry could look past the boy and search for the Snitch in every direction without being obvious.

After Angelina scored a goal, making it seventy to thirty, Harry saw a flash of gold near the Slytherin goals and took off after it immediately. Draco, wary of another feint, was slow to follow him. The roar of the crowd soon disabused him of that notion and he began pushing his broom for every scrap of speed to try and catch his nemesis.

Harry cursed as he dodged a Bludger from one of the Slytherin beaters. The Snitch passed behind the goal posts and disappeared again. Harry glanced behind him as he flattened his dive until he was just skimming above the turf. Draco was obviously pushing his broom for all it was worth in an attempt to catch up.

Pulling back sharply on the handle, Harry engaged the braking charms and let the uneven drag flip the broom over onto its back as it slewed sideways. Letting go with one hand and unhooking a foot, Harry splayed his limbs and dropped into a rough ‘Starfish and Stick’ - right in Draco’s flight path.

Draco didn’t even have time to yell as he jerked his speeding broom into a sharp turn to avoid Harry. Directly colliding with the opposing

Seeker when not in pursuit of the Snitch could get Draco thrown out of the game if Madam Hooch were so inclined. Unfortunately, he couldn't manage a completely flat turn. His right toe dug into the turf, and at the speed he was travelling - an instant later the Malfoy heir was tumbling across the pitch in a blur of silver and green robes.

Harry hauled himself back up onto his broom, just in time for a Bludger to glance off his hip and send him spinning. The Slytherin beaters were closing in with blood in their eyes. This made sense, because if the Snitch appeared while Draco was taking a dirt-nap, they had no prayer of winning.

The sensibility of their actions did nothing to deter Harry's anger though. As soon as he got his broom back under control he shot up toward the Slytherin beaters, going almost as fast as the broom could go. The one on the right, Jiles Derrick, was closing in on an arcing Bludger, bat poised to strike. Harry gritted his teeth and shot almost directly toward the thick-set boy. As the beater closed in on the Bludger and cocked his arm back to hammer it with his enchanted bat, Harry veered off at high speed.

Derrick got a nasty grin as he struck the iron ball with a resounding smack. He waited until Harry was right next to him to maximize the damage. When Harry saw the boy's arm begin to move, he opened the broom up the rest of the way, gaining a tiny increase in speed.

This was enough to make the Bludger brush the back of Harry's robes instead of staving in his ribcage. There was a nasty crunching sound a moment later though. Derrick's partner, Bole, was directly in the path of the hard-struck Bludger, and it nailed the boy dead-centre in the chest. Bole flew backwards off his broom and plummeted toward the ground before someone caught him with a levitation charm.

There was a short time out while Bole floated to the ground. Harry could see Hermione had her wand out now, and was carefully lowering the boy toward an extremely sour-looking Severus Snape. Harry carefully repressed a smile. Would Snape be forced to give her house points for this?



After a short examination, the Potions Master stated that Bole had broken ribs and possibly a fractured sternum. Gilderoy Lockhart offered to help; using a charm he'd performed 'dozens of times.' Harry felt a touch of dread and tried to find a spot to land nearby. If the inept buffoon masquerading as a Defence Professor removed the bones in Boles' chest, the boy could easily suffocate before they could get him to the castle.

Lockhart was brushing off the boy's team-mates and rolling up his sleeves when he suddenly froze. Snape had placed the tip of his wand in the hollow underneath Lockhart's jaw.

"My student will be attended to by an accredited healer or medi-wizard. You, Professor Lockhart, are neither of those and I will thank you to put away that wand."

Lockhart froze in place, and then cautiously stepped back. Harry let out a relieved sigh. Snape removed his wand and gestured at the prone student. Bole's body slowly lifted into the air and followed Professor Snape as he walked toward the castle. After they left, the Defence Professor blustered a bit about how the man was 'obviously distraught' over his student's injury.

The game soon resumed, but Derrick's confidence was shattered after knocking out his team-mate. Fred and George dominated the Bludgers and pretty much stifled the Slytherin Chasers while Katie, Alicia, and Angelina ran up the score. Draco was hurting from his two turfings and flinched every time Harry swerved towards him. Finally, Harry saw the Snitch near mid-field and began to slowly drift in that direction. Draco was still quartering the pitch and checking near the Gryffindor goal posts when the shout went up from the crowd.

Harry was barely ten feet away when someone in the stands noticed the Snitch hovering near the ground. Easing forward as Draco hauled his broom around in a desperate bank, Harry neatly plucked the Snitch out of the air. The final score was three hundred twenty to ninety in favour of the Gryffindor Lions.

As the pitch erupted in cheers and shouts, Harry was half afraid Oliver was going to kiss him as the team landed at mid-field. Fred and George hoisted Harry up onto their shoulders to spare him such

a fate. Harry found his friends standing on the bleachers and waved to them. Ron's face was nearly purple and Ginny's wasn't far off. Luna had an odd smile on her face while Neville's eyes were fixed in a glassy stare pointed somewhere off in the distance. Hermione looked like she was about to pass out from laughing, and Harry abruptly decided to look away. He probably didn't want to know.

He did notice that Marcus Flint was standing over a red-faced Draco Malfoy, shouting as he repeatedly jabbed a thick finger into the smaller boy's chest. Harry imagined Draco was getting a sound reaming for his failure to deliver on pretty much everything he was supposed to do today. How very sad for him.

The agent-in-place carefully folded the letter he'd received. Among the veiled insults and threats were some very specific instructions. Things were not progressing as they should and he was to ascertain why.

As he lay back on his bed and stared up at the canopy, he pondered his options. He had a fair idea of the source of the difficulties, but direct action was out of the question at this time.

Or was it?

Setting this up would be difficult, but not completely impossible. It was rather like Wizarding chess. You had the pieces, you had the board, and you had an objective. Everything moved according to the game's rigid mathematics. The trick was to set up the pieces on the board in such a way that achieving the objective wasn't just possible, but inevitable.

Inevitable was good, since the consequences of failure didn't really bear thinking about. Not if he wanted to maintain his sanity, anyway. Some games have higher stakes than anyone can imagine – both good and bad.

The first thing to do was to gather the pieces. His current helpers had proven themselves to not be up to the task, especially given the opposition they were facing. They'd failed him for the last time. That was another lesson he'd learned the hard way.

He would now need some very specialized allies to make his plan work, but he knew what inducements he could offer. There were some inducements that his unwitting ally would never refuse. And that was a valuable lesson. No matter how hard and controlled someone may be, there was always a key that would unlock them. Everyone wanted something - or someone.

The letter hadn't specified a timeframe, but the boy knew that sooner was preferable to later. On the other hand, later was better than never, wasn't it? The objective was visible, and the steps leading up to it were obvious. It was the beginning and intermediate phases that were hazy and ambiguous. Of course, that was the hazard when one planned things out in such a way.

He would need time to work out the earlier stages, and in all likelihood it would take considerable time to complete them as well.

That being the case, he needed to act soon to guarantee he had as much time as possible. In this case, too much was far better than not enough, wasn't it? He fingered his wand and began planning the first of many, many steps.

A/N:

All right, that was a little shorter than usual, but this felt like a good place to end it.

Thanks for the good wishes! I am hale and hearty once again – and posting a new chapter four days after the last one. You all have been very generous with your reviews! And you only spur me to update faster!

If you like the lack of mis-spellings, punctuation errors, and general grammatical stupidity in this story, you have two choices. You can either thank Bill Gates for Microsoft Word (but he's already rich and doesn't really care what you think) or you can send a PM and thank my beta Runsamok. Runsamok is a lot cuter than Bill too.

I am sort of curious about why I receive reviews asking very specific questions... only to notice that they haven't signed in and did not fill in

an email address. It's a little hard to respond to those, you know? (Emily P. A. this means you.)

Yes, I am having far too much fun writing Luna. It's no wonder she's one of JKR's favorites. I actually based her initial attraction to Neville off of something I read once. One genuine Marvel-surplus No-Prize goes out to the first person to identify where the parallel was drawn from...

If you think Harry is a little dominating at quidditch, then you're right. He started the team with six years of experience as a Seeker, and he's only improved since then with Fred and George trying so hard to knock him off his broom during practices. With Oliver's fanatical training regimens (in both lifetimes), it only makes sense that Harry is playing at nearly a professional level by now.

And you know you like watching Draco eat turf. Admit it, you do!

I have a heart-rending confession to make. I was cheering for Snape at one point in this chapter. I actually hate Lockhart more, which is a little frightening, isn't it?

Yes, I've thought of a possible reason for Dumbledore's seemingly irrational belief in and support of Snape. I haven't seen anyone else do it, and you will see it come out eventually. (But probably not for a while though.)

I've heard about JKR's comments regarding Floppy the Sorting Hat not being a Horcrux. As they were made long after I wrote the relevant chapters of this story, I've decided not to go back and do a major re-write. HP&NFP will become AU when book seven comes out anyway, right? (And the future fates of Snape and Draco were left the way they were to support either interpretation of Snape's actions in HBP. If he was, in the end, working for the light, then Voldemort figured it out and left him in an unmarked grave. If not, Joe Auror nailed him during one of the large battles.)

That said - if I screw up something that has already been published, please let me know!

Plot discussions and individual Q&A will be addressed on my yahoo group (viridiandreams, see my author profile for the link) A lot of interesting discussions are taking place there as well.

Thanks for reading!

-Matthew

PS – Yes, I have thought about going professional. Thus far I have struck out trying to find an agent to represent me. (I contacted everyone in Writer's Guide who'll touch contemporary fantasy.) My ability to write an intriguing query letter may be what's at fault though... If anyone does know an agent, feel free to let me know. Cheers and Happy New Year!

## Chapter 22

The post-Quidditch party in the Gryffindor tower was truly epic in scale. Fred and George somehow 'acquired' several cases of butterbeer, and used warming charms to serve it piping hot. Percy looked a little upset, but after a whispered conference with the twins, he accepted a mug and sat down near the fire.

Harry noticed he looked a little pale and nudged George. "What did you say to him," he whispered.

"Old Perce started objecting to the butterbeer, so Fred and I said better this than Firewhisky," George whispered back. "If he objected to this, next time we'll bring back a case of Ogden's Finest and tell people it was his idea."

"But who'd believe you?"

"If he takes away the butterbeer, we wouldn't have any choice then would we? We could swear to that under Veritaserum, and then he'd be sunk," George said with a wicked grin

Harry coughed. "Where did you two get your paws on Veritaserum?"

Fred ambled over to join in the conversation. "We made it, mate." He drained his mug of steaming butterbeer and opened a fresh bottle.

"You can make Veritaserum?" Harry was fairly sure his jaw had dropped open.

"Harry, my dear boy-" Fred chuckled.

"-and now adopted little brother-" George reminded him.

"Yes indeed, now Harry – what form do most of our pranks take?"

Harry closed his eyes and squeezed the bridge of his nose. "Liquids, powders, pastes, and assorted goops. You've been throwing your Potions exams, haven't you?"

The twins shrugged in unison. "It's not like Snape would give us a fair grade anyway," Fred assured him.

"We just save him the trouble of deliberately failing us," George added helpfully. "But we can brew just about anything in the textbook-"

"Provided we have the ingredients, of course," Fred stipulated. "Most of our brews taste good as well."

"You realize if Mum finds out, she's going to kill the two of you. That's a lot of blackmail material, right there," Harry said with a crooked grin.

The twins looked at each other. "Won't work Harry," Fred informed him. "Not only are you far too decent a bloke to stoop to our level..."

"But even if you did tell her," George agreed, "we'll just mention that you slipped and called her 'Mum' and she'll forget why she was mad."

Harry shook his head and started laughing. *Trust the twins to be highly skilled in a subject taught by the Professor they despise*, he mused. *Veritaserum is a NEWT-level potion.*

He took his mug and walked over to one of the bay windows that opened onto the common room. He looked out across the darkening grounds and remembered joking with Sirius about being the Slytherin seeker. He scowled at the gathering gloom. It felt vaguely obscene that he was standing here, warm and safe with a mug of butterbeer, while Sirius might be dead or suffering goodness knows what.

He supposed he might be pushing people so hard on the training as some obscure form of penance. Still, he needed to make sure they were ready when Voldemort made his move. He could feel the difference in his own strength and endurance. He was also a little surprised at how strong his blasting curse had been when Ron startled him. No one confronted him about that, but he could tell it had been noted.

Harry saw Colin edging toward him with his camera. He'd toned it down a lot after Ron had a little talk with him, the contents of which Harry wasn't sure he really wanted to know. Still, the first year would

probably consider the Quidditch victory to be enough of a 'special occasion' to justify taking another picture. Harry downed the rest of his butterbeer, left the mug on a side table, and raced up the stairs to his dormitory.

Harry threw himself on his bed and stared up at the canopy. After a moment he unlocked his trunk and pulled out some of his recent correspondence. He sorted it by author and went through them again.

Remus Lupin had no idea where Sirius might be, or whether he even really escaped. The Black family home at number twelve Grimmauld Place was still abandoned. Owls with messages addressed to Sirius simply circled around in confusion, which could mean any one of half a dozen things.

Rita Skeeter hadn't been able to interest her editor in a follow-up story unless she had new information to include. None of her contacts, voluntary or otherwise, in the Ministry knew anything useful. She also reminded him that he owed her an interview this summer, which Harry really wasn't looking forward to. At least she'd have a vested interest in not smearing him this time around.

Mrs. Weasley reported that the new faces in the village were still there, and several suspicious looking people had been spotted near The Burrow. After one of these people triggered the outermost wards, the rest kept their distance. None of them wished to be stunned for the better part of a day. Harry was just glad the man had fallen backwards instead of forwards. If he'd been a little more stubborn about breaking through the results might have been - messy.

Goldfarb at least had nothing but good news. After a short legal proceeding, the Dursleys lost their home. It seems Vernon had taken out a second mortgage the previous year and his credit rating was rather shaky. With the loss of Vernon's income, his arrest for fiscal malfeasance, and indirect pressure from Goldfarb's agents, the holders of his note decided to immediately call it due. The icing on the cake was a newspaper clipping taken from the Surrey Advertiser. Petunia had been arrested for shoplifting at the grocers.

Harry cracked a nasty grin and wondered if he was an awful person for taking such delight in their misery. He shrugged. With all he was



doing to save people he'd likely never meet, he figured karma owed him a little petty behaviour. Besides, he was just helping his so-called relatives pay their own karmic debts, right?

Harry set the letters aside and stretched out. There didn't seem to be anything he could do now, but he nonetheless felt like he was forgetting something. He wished he could write down his plans and objectives so he could try to organize everything. But he couldn't take the chance. Snape could demand he turn out his pockets any time he saw him. His seven-year plan for Destroying Voldemort and Saving the Wizarding World <sup>TM</sup> would be very interesting reading – and damn hard to explain if it fell into the wrong hands.

He tried to relax and let the normal post-game adrenalin fade. He'd taken an unwholesome glee in making Draco wish he'd never learned to fly a broom, but something about the smarmy bigot made Harry want to thrash him. The little ponce played a key role in Dumbledore's death, even if he didn't have the stones to cast the fatal spell. The death of the only wizard Voldemort ever feared made the Hogwarts Massacre inevitable.

Harry sighed. He'd tell the headmaster everything he knew, if he could just be sure the man would act appropriately. Surprisingly enough, the man's portrait had counselled against immediately disclosing future events. Evidently the personality-imprint remembered some fleeting concerns he'd had about Harry when he first came to Hogwarts. It also knew the reason for his unwavering support of Severus Snape. It made sense when put in the right context. Harry acknowledged this freely. It still didn't mean that the consequences were any less severe.

On the other hand, the conversation he'd overheard between the two of them gave him some hope. He doubted Dumbledore would have rebuked Snape like that in front of others, but the fact that he did so at all was encouraging. The headmaster also hadn't tried his Legilimency on Harry since the previous year. He hoped that stopping Quirrell and his master from reaching the stone last spring had earned him a little trust in Professor Dumbledore's eyes.

The more he thought about his plans and his options, the more Harry Potter felt like Harry the lab rat, attempting to navigate a maze filled with deadly traps. He closed his eyes and tried to will his racing mind to rest. Surprisingly enough, it worked after a few minutes.

A couple of weeks later, the school was abuzz with what happened at the Ravenclaw Quidditch practice. Harry heard about it at lunch from Ron.

"Fred and George are friendly with some of their team's supporters," Ron told them in between bites of chicken. "I think they studied together for Charms... Anyway, they play Hufflepuff Saturday, you know?"

Harry nodded and took a sip of pumpkin juice.

Ron swallowed, ignoring the impatient look Hermione gave him. "Right, well, when they were practicing yesterday, someone decided to take out their Seeker."

Harry gulped. "What?"

"Cho Chang. Pretty Chinese third year girl, you've seen her around, right? She replaced Frobisher as Seeker when he graduated."

Harry nodded dumbly. He hadn't said anything to her, but it was sort of weird to see the girl he'd briefly had a crush on in his prior life. "What happened to her?"

"Someone blew her off her broom during practice. Nailed her with a stunning spell when she was pretty high up. She hit the ground hard and broke a lot of bones. They heard it was touch and go whether she'd make it. They've got her at St Mungo's now, trying to repair a lot of broken bones and re-grow her spine." Ron's voice was subdued as he relayed the grim news. "They searched the woods where the spell came from, but didn't find anything."

"That explains a lot of what I'm seeing now," Hermione said, frowning over her shoulder. Most of the Ravenclaw students were glaring at the Hufflepuffs, who looked confused and distinctly uncomfortable.

Ron frowned. "You don't honestly think someone in Hufflepuff did it? If Ravenclaw was about to play Slytherin, I could see that. I'd line them all up and check their wands straight away. But the 'Puffs? That's mental."

Neville shrugged. "But that's who they are playing in a couple of days; no one else has anything to gain. Professor Sprout was really upset about it yesterday. If it was someone from her house, they better hope an Auror arrests them before she gets her hands on them." He shuddered. "I never even thought of using a trowel like that before."

Hermione gave him an odd look as she spoke up. "That also explains why Professor Flitwick changed his syllabus. He taught the Prior Incantato charm in all the classes attended by Hufflepuff students. He must have wanted to see if anyone's wand would show a stunning spell."

"That's not how I'd want to get caught either," Ginny said. "I heard a rumour that he was a duelling champion when he was younger."

"I'd be more afraid of what the other Hufflepuffs would do," Luna added in that detached, toneless manner that Harry recognized as her 'thinking while I'm talking' voice. "They prize loyalty, only now the rest of the school sees them as disloyal. They feel betrayed and angry now. If this was done by one of their own, that person has betrayed all of them by making the rest of the school treat them as traitors."

Harry shook his head. "I doubt it was a Hufflepuff student," Harry said. "It's just too obvious. I think someone is just trying to stir up trouble." Though he was outwardly calm, Harry found his thoughts were racing. He remembered Oliver telling him before their third year match that Cho previously had some trouble with injuries... but he knew he would have heard about it if someone had a near-fatal accident. Especially if it had obviously been no accident.

If this didn't happen in the previous timeline, Harry knew it had something to do with him. Some change he had made this time around resulted in someone trying to murder Cho Chang. Or at least make sure she was in no shape to play. Try as he might, Harry could not reason out any connection between his changes and this incident.

The fact that the perpetrator hadn't been caught was even more unsettling.

Of course, after this, Ron was even more insistent on all five of them accompanying Harry to every Quidditch practice. Harry doubted someone had declared open season on Seekers, but he couldn't dissuade Ron, or anyone else for that matter. "Better to be safe than sorry" had become Ron's motto, and honestly Harry couldn't disagree. He'd been operating under a similar strategy since the dream where he'd met his future self.

Harry also had to admit it was comforting when the lengthening shadows at the end of practice made the skin between his shoulder blades crawl. During the next practice he made a point never to hover and make himself an easy target. But if he did get stunned, the odds were very good that one of the five could levitate him before he hit the ground. Snape very grudgingly gave Hermione five house points for catching Bole after Derrick's errant Bludger had knocked out the Slytherin beater. Hermione was very gracious when he announced this fact at their next Potions class, but Harry knew she'd remember the look on his face for a long time.

At the beginning of the practice, Oliver announced that the heads of house held a meeting regarding the incident with the Ravenclaw seeker. It was decided that since this was an overt act of sabotage, the Ravenclaw team would not be required to play this weekend. Fred and George looked a little outraged about that, given that usually teams were required to play whether they had injured players or not. Oliver told them off, saying Professor McGonagall said the healers weren't sure whether Chang would ever ride a broom again.

Harry imagined Oliver had voiced the same objections to his head of house and been told to shut it in a similar manner.

To make a long story short, Professors McGonagall and Snape agreed to a coin toss. McGonagall won, so Slytherin would be playing Hufflepuff this weekend. Ravenclaw would take their slot and play the Hufflepuffs in early May. Harry was a little relieved that they wouldn't be playing again on such short notice. Oliver made a point of scouting the other teams as much as possible when they played, looking for

strengths and weaknesses in their game. Technically, the Slytherin team was at a slight disadvantage. However, after their crushing defeat in the first match of the season, their prospects for the Quidditch Cup were remarkably dim.

That weekend, the Slytherin team played like they had something to prove. The Hufflepuffs were still demoralized from being ostracized by their classmates. The fact that a fair number of Ravenclaw students were cheering on the Slytherin team must have been rather disconcerting as well.

The results were not pretty. Derrick and Bole knocked one of the Hufflepuff chasers unconscious minutes into the game after their Doplebeater Defence caromed the Bludger off the boy's skull. Soon another Hufflepuff chaser was sporting a dislocated elbow and could barely fly. After that, the Slytherin chasers ran the Hufflepuff keeper ragged while Miles Bletchley, the Slytherin keeper made a great show of lounging on his broom. The massacre only ended after Draco Malfoy on his Nimbus Two Thousand and One outran Cedric Diggory on his Cleansweep Seven to grab the Snitch. The final score was three hundred and twenty to forty in favour of the Slytherin team.

Harry's stomach twisted to see Draco strutting off the field. He looked away and saw Cedric Diggory and the other Hufflepuffs limping toward the changing rooms. Harry spoke to his friends and they got up and began fighting their way through the crowd. The Hufflepuff captain, a seventh year Harry didn't really know, had already left to take his injured chaser to Madam Pomfrey. But it was really Cedric that Harry wanted to see. Harry felt he owed the boy for inadvertently leading him to his death at Voldemort's hand. More importantly, he remembered Cedric getting the other Hufflepuffs to lay off him after the first task of the Triwizard Tournament. Now it was time to return that favour.

"Diggory?" he called out.

Cedric stopped, wincing a little. But when he turned around he appeared confused. "Can I help you?" he asked politely. Despite the sweat and dirt, he still looked like he stepped off a recruiting poster.

*Damn, he even looked like a movie star this far back,* Harry mused ruefully. *No wonder Cho went after him.* He cleared his throat. "No one thinking clearly believes you lot had anything to do with Cho Chang. When they all calm down, they're going to feel rather stupid," he said rather loudly as he stuck out his hand to the startled Seeker.

Cedric shook his hand, frowning. "I - well, thanks Harry. That means a lot, coming from you. Especially after that mess over Summer Holiday. My parents, they didn't say anything about it until afterward - I would have told them you'd rather stay with..." his voice trailed off and he nodded at Ron, whose expression had gone a trifle frosty.

Harry shrugged. "It's water under the bridge as far as I'm concerned. It all worked out in the end. They were just there as Dumbledore's back-up plan, I suppose. There were worse possible outcomes, you know."

Cedric nodded thoughtfully. "I heard. I do appreciate you Gryffindors not thinking the worst of us as well - not that we'll take it easy on you when we play, even if we are probably out of the running for the Cup."

"We wouldn't want it any other way," Harry assured him.

As they made their way back to the Great Hall for dinner, Ron eyed Harry curiously. "What was that all about?" he finally asked.

Harry just smiled at him. "It was the right thing to do," was all he would say. Hermione frowned as she tried to puzzle out his logic. Ginny nudged Harry with her elbow and nodded toward the bushy-haired witch. Harry gave her a small grin as they mounted the steps to the main entrance.

December couldn't come soon enough for Harry and his friends. He was anticipating spending his first Christmas at The Burrow, while his friends were looking forward to a break from Snape over the winter holiday. Potions classes had slowly become a nightmare as the increasingly frustrated Legilimens took his anger out on them. Hermione and Neville could almost shut him out, and it would take him a while to get through their defences. Unfortunately, Snape picked up on Ginny and Luna's friendship with the others, and began tormenting the Weasley girl during the first year Potions class. Luna,

however, usually worked with Ginny, and sat as close to her as possible.

On one memorable occasion, they contrived to have Ginny drop her quill while Snape was ripping into her mind, and Luna bent over to pick it up at the same time as her friend. Luna's head passed between Snape and Ginny before he realized what was happening. The results were quite gratifying as the Potions Professor stumbled and fell against his desk, gasping aloud. Slipping and accidentally entering Luna Lovegood's mind was not a mistake anyone would want to make twice.

Nonetheless, his friends' torment left Harry second-guessing himself. There were several types of Occlumency described in the book. He'd originally decided on the more straightforward version that used the person's own magic to form a barrier against mental intrusion – mainly because that was the easiest to master. It did, however, have some disadvantages. It was very obvious to the Legilimens that they were being blocked – which led to Snape's foul mood and constant abuse.

There were amulets that could be constructed or purchased that would also block mental intrusions. Unfortunately, Harry had no illusions about Snape abusing his authority as a Professor to confiscate or destroy any possessions of theirs. The man acted like he was incensed that mere students wouldn't cede him access to their thoughts and memories as his right. And the man lambasted *him* as arrogant!

The more subtle Occlumency methods used misdirection to deflect probes away from sensitive memories. On the plus side, a skilful enough user could deceive a Legilimens without the invader even being aware of the resistance. Unfortunately, this method was much harder to master, and was less than effective if the user was upset or experiencing any sort of strong emotion. This was driven home to Harry when Snape tried to teach it to him during his disastrous fifth year at Hogwarts. Had Snape purposefully taught him the less effective version for himself at Voldemort's orders? Or was it the only version he knew? The few times Harry had prodded the man's mind, he'd felt some push back at the borders, but it might just have been

the man's natural resistance after spending so much time around Voldemort.

Harry stopped debating his choice of methodology when he realized that there was no chance of them mastering the harder method before Snape uncovered at least one memory of them practicing or discussing Occlumency. At that point they would have been in for the same abuse anyway.

That logic reassured Harry that he'd made the right choice, but watching his friends go through the mental wringer during Potions class was something he'd never forget. He found himself going through his mental list of reasons why he couldn't just murder Snape on the spot. Each time Harry found his reasons sounded a little less convincing. A couple of weeks away from the man might serve to curb his homicidal impulses.

It was with some satisfaction that Harry watched Professor McGonagall collecting the names of students who would be staying at Hogwarts over the holidays. It felt a little odd to remember that he had a home to go to now. Nice, but odd. He hoped they would be able to visit Diagon Alley for some Christmas shopping.

As the holidays approached, Harry wasn't sure if Lockhart would be pushing to start the Duelling Club or not. The fraud's classes with the Gryffindors had definitely become more than he bargained for. Led by Hermione, Harry and his friends mercilessly pressed him for details on his supposed conquests. By the end of what was supposed to be a session of boasting, the man was often stammering and sweating. If he arrived for class early, Harry sometimes saw the man reading through his own books, or worse, a standard reference, trying to prepare himself.

In desperation at how difficult this 'easy teaching job' had become, Lockhart fell back on the Standard Book of Spells. He started them practicing the various curses and hexes on each other. Before long, Seamus, Dean, Lavender, and Parvati refused to work with Harry or his friends. They weren't nasty about it, but their classmates knew the four of them had been practicing a lot on their own. Whenever Lockhart told them to pair off, the two boys and two girls made sure



they hooked up. Harry really didn't mind, because he knew Neville, Hermione, or Ron would give him a much better run for his money than the others.

All the same, Harry was very careful to keep his power reigned in when casting indoors, especially at his friends. He didn't want another wild surge to put someone in the hospital wing. It brought a lump to his throat when Ron agreed to face him the first time with no hesitation. Harry made a point of casting the jelly-legs jinx with as little power as he could. He was successful in that respect – Ron could actually force his legs to straighten up and stay rigid if he concentrated.

On the other hand, Harry felt it might be nice to face opponents he wouldn't feel obligated to hold back against. So while their early mornings were filled with practicing dodging and drilling on shield charms, Harry kept an eye on the notice board in the entry hall. Finally, on a gray Thursday that threatened snow, he noticed a parchment had been posted that already drew a small crowd.

"A duelling club?" Neville asked.

"I wonder who is sponsoring it?" Hermione asked.

"I know one way to find out," Harry answered as he edged up to the board. "Eight o'clock tonight in the Great Hall."

That evening the Great Hall was decked out just like Harry remembered, complete with a large golden stage. Harry hoped his smile didn't become too feral as Professor Lockhart pranced out.

"Good evening, everyone. Gather round, gather round. Can everyone see me? Can everyone hear me? Excellent!" The man was practically preening in his dark plum robes. "Now Professor Dumbledore has granted me permission to start this duelling club to train you all in how to defend yourselves. I've had to do so no small number of times myself, and let me tell you – there's nothing more important than knowing how to protect yourself. See my published works for details!"

Harry felt his nails digging into his palms as he restrained himself from cursing the man on the spot. His hypocrisy was galling, given

what he'd told Harry about how improperly trained students wouldn't survive to complain.

"Let me introduce my assistant, Professor Snape," Lockhart announced, grinning. "He tells me he knows a little about duelling himself, and has agreed to help me with a short demonstration. Now, he's being a good sport about this, so don't worry, I won't hurt him, never fear!"

Harry found himself looking forward to what he knew would happen next. Snape looked positively murderous.

Lockhart and Snape faced each other, bowing. Lockhart continued his narration, oblivious to the potion master's disdain. "As you can see, we are holding our wands in the accepted combative position. On the count of three, we will cast our first spells. Never fear, neither of us will cast anything lethal!"

Ron mimed a disappointed sigh and Hermione muffled a snort.

On the count of three, both men raised their wands. Snape's *Expelliarmus* struck first, the blast of red light blowing Lockhart off the stage and leaving him lying in a crumpled heap at the base of a wall.

The Slytherin students' cheers broke off in confusion as Harry gave Snape a standing ovation. After a few nudges, his friends joined in as well. The Slytherin Head of House blinked twice, staring at Harry.

Although it was a close thing, Harry did respect Snape slightly more than Lockhart. The man was a complete bastard, but that was easier to stomach than the utter fraud teaching Defence. *Besides, he's probably going mad trying to figure out what I'm up to now*, Harry reflected.

Snape must have been in an ill temper when he cursed Lockhart, because it took a couple of minutes before the man could climb to his feet again. Harry supposed that if it was Snape's frustration about the Occlumency situation, then it was true what they said about silver linings.

Lockhart's blather as he tried to laugh off his thrashing was less than convincing. That probably had something to do with the fact that he couldn't stand up completely straight. Snape moved through the crowd and paired everyone off. True to form, Neville was set up with Justin Finch-Fletchley, Ron with Seamus (to the Irish boy's noticeable dismay), Hermione with Millicent Bulstrode, and Harry, of course, with Draco Malfoy.

"Face your partners!" Lockhart called out, trying to regain some semblance of control.

Harry gave Draco the barest of nods. If he remembered correctly, the little bastard was going to jump the gun a little.

"Wands at the ready!" shouted Lockhart, getting into the theatricality of the moment again. "On the count of three, cast to disarm, only! One... Two... Three..."

Draco's wand started moving on two, but Harry felt Snape's eyes on him. He knew if he conjured a shield before 'Three', he would be called on it, no matter how Draco cheated. Instead he rolled his torso and ducked to the side, letting the Slytherin's spell shoot past him. After the third count, he brought his wand up.

"Expelliarmus!" *Let no one accuse me of breaking the rules here*, Harry grumbled to himself as Draco tried to dodge his counterstroke. The spell clipped Draco in his left shoulder, spinning him around. The boy did, however, maintain hold of his wand.

Draco's eyes lit with rage and he brought his wand up again. Harry braced himself and began the motions for a shield charm when Snape's voice cut through the air like a whip. "Enough! Cease this instant!" He snarled in a venomous tone.

Harry raised the point of his wand, but didn't take his eyes off Draco as Snape spoke to his student in a voice too quiet to hear. Peripherally, Harry was aware of Neville releasing Justin from a leg-locker curse as Ron handed Seamus his wand back. Hermione extended a hand to Millicent, helping the larger girl up from the floor. Bulstrode gave her a respectful nod as she rubbed at her right wrist and forearm.

The Great Hall was in chaos, with roughed up and afflicted students everywhere. Lockhart tried to sort things out, and finally suggested that they work on blocking unfriendly spells.

Of course, Snape's voice rang out over the clamour and suggested Harry and Draco take the stage for the demonstration – something the Boy Who Lived had been anticipating with some glee.

Harry ignored Lockhart's bumbling advice, instead focusing on Draco as Snape whispered something into the blond boy's ear. Harry smiled as he stood on the stage in front of most of the school. He resisted the urge to twirl his wand in his fingers.

Lockhart counted off the start of the duel, this time counting down from three for some odd reason. Harry wondered idly if he'd been concussed by the wall.

Draco evidently wasn't as eager to be caught cheating by the entire student body, so he refrained from casting until *after* Lockhart said "Go!" *Serpensortia!* the Slytherin yelled and a nasty great black snake flew out of the end of his wand.

The snake immediately began slithering toward Harry, who watched it coolly. Having absolutely no desire to be publicly identified as a Parselmouth, he waited until the snake reached the mid-point between himself and his leering opponent.

"*Reducto!*" Harry snarled and the snake exploded into fragments. A girl shrieked as she was covered in snake guts, but the fragments of the conjured snake almost instantly evaporated in puffs of black smoke.

"*Furnunculus!*" Draco called out, levelling his wand at Harry. A beam of sickly orange light leapt across the space between them.

"*Protego!*" Harry replied, angling his wand carefully and giving it a twist as he finished the incantation. A shimmering shield appeared in front of Harry, cocked at a slight angle. Draco's spell struck it with a bang, and it rebounded off to one side of the stage. It hit Pansy Parkinson squarely between the eyes and she shrieked as huge pus-weeping boils covered her face.

Harry let the shield charm drop and smirked at Draco.

*“Tarantallegra!”* Draco spat.

*“Protego!”* Harry’s shield charm was cocked at a different angle this time. Draco’s spell shot back the almost exactly the way it came, but clipped Gregory Goyle. Draco’s bristly-haired bodyguard abruptly began dancing a clumsy jig, trampling on several peoples’ feet before he tripped and fell out of sight.

A deflected stunning spell dropped Vincent Crabbe like a sack of potatoes, and Draco started to really lose it. Harry was mildly surprised when the pale boy began firing off curses he definitely hadn’t learned at Hogwarts. It was rather obvious that the boy had been practicing over the summer as a column of flames spat from the end of his wand like a flamethrower. It was spread out enough that Harry’s shield charm just stopped it, rather than deflecting it. Not that Harry would necessarily risk killing someone in the crowd.

The cloud of flames did, however, obscure his vision for a moment. He wasn’t expecting it when the flames began to dissipate and Draco’s voice snarled *“Diffindo!”* The cutting charm punched through the weakened shield as Harry instinctively threw himself to the side. Something tugged at the sleeve of his robes as a hot brand was dragged across the top of Harry’s left shoulder.

*“Expelliarmus!”* Harry barked as he rolled onto one knee. Draco ducked and used another cutting charm. This time Harry saw it coming and his shield charm held.

It was purely coincidental that the deflected spell parted Snape’s hair. The man’s eyes blazed with fury as a few strands fell to the floor. His wand came up and Harry knew that play time was over.

*“Expelliarmus!”* Harry called out as Draco began another spell. He knew that loud verbalizations were technically bad form, but he didn’t want there to be any question as to what he was casting.

Draco didn’t duck in time, and was hurled backward as his wand was torn from his grasp. He rolled off the edge of the stage into some Slytherin upperclassmen as his wand flew end over end across the

stage. Harry switched his wand to his left hand, wincing as his shoulder began to complain. As slowly as the tumbling wand descended, it was easy for the Gryffindor Seeker to catch it in his right hand. He held Draco's wand gingerly as he rose to his feet. He wondered what horrors it committed in the future as a low murmur broke out among the spectators.

"Hand that over, Potter," Professor Snape demanded in a venomous tone. The man had already covered half the length of the stage, his eyes boring into Harry.

"I'd be doing him a favour if I snapped this," Harry replied. "There are many with far less tolerance for arrogant Purebloods than I."

Snape's fury was almost palpable after Harry threw his own words back in his face. Harry tossed him Draco's wand and jumped down off the stage. The jarring as he landed set his shoulder to aching again, but he wouldn't give them the satisfaction of seeing him wince. He ignored the murmurs of the crowd as he strode away.

Of course, the minute they followed him out of the Great Hall, Harry's friends insisted on dragging him to the hospital wing. Not that he was too reluctant; his shoulder ached abominably and the sleeve of his robes was soaked with blood.

Madame Pomfrey fussed over him with her wand and a foul-smelling salve. "Duelling Clubs! What sorts of idiocy will that fool come up with next?" she muttered, scowling.

Harry resisted the urge to shrug. "If you are referring to whom I think you are, he is. But he did call for disarming spells only. Draco just doesn't like to follow rules."

Ron and the others protested when they were asked to wait outside the treatment area. It would be curfew soon and they didn't want to be shooed back to the Gryffindor tower without Harry. But as he sat there on a bed with his robes and shirt removed, Harry began to regret interceding with Madam Pomfrey. Ginny applied a great deal of concentration to casting *Scourgify* on Harry's blood-stained robes.

"Mr. Malfoy's conduct was reprehensible," Professor McGonagall said briskly as she entered the infirmary. "But there are also questions about your actions as well, Mr. Potter," she continued, ignoring the glares from five of her students.

"What sort of questions, Professor?" Harry asked blandly.

"While Mr. Malfoy displayed a - curious - knowledge of curses and hexes well above his grade level, his father has confirmed the boy received private tutoring over the summer. There are questions about your unexpected prowess as well. I would prefer to clear those up as soon as possible."

"I'm not sure what you mean," Harry said innocently. "I only used a shield charm and a disarming spell against him."

"I believe it was more the - facility - with which you were able to use those spells," McGonagall replied with some asperity.

"Professor McGonagall," Hermione said hesitantly, "Harry, well, we've all been practicing shield charms for over two weeks now. On our own."

Surprised, McGonagall turned toward Hermione. She was about to say something when she was interrupted.

"That is correct, Minerva," Dumbledore said, eyes twinkling merrily. "I've been watching their exercises with some curiosity now, but I daresay their efforts have paid off, at least in Harry's case."

Professor McGonagall turned toward the headmaster with a questioning look.

"Our colleague has - decided to retire to his quarters to recover his composure. He has had quite a trying day, from what I understand." Dumbledore then turned his attention back toward Harry. "Although I won't fault a student for making efforts to improve, I will admit I am curious as to why you six are going to such lengths."

Harry wasn't entirely sure if it was an honest question or not. He decided to simply take the bull by the horns. "We're learning to

defend ourselves because we've learned that Hogwarts isn't the safest place to acquire an education." Professor McGonagall's lips grew even thinner as Dumbledore paused. *Maybe he's surprised at my bluntness?* Harry wondered.

"Harry, I assure you that we will take any measure necessary to ensure the safety of our students," the headmaster replied, his eyes no longer twinkling quite so merrily.

Harry just stared at the man for a long moment before laughing bitterly. He pulled on his bloody shirt and nodded thanks to Ginny as she handed him his robe.

Harry stalked toward the exit and the others followed him. Hermione turned back when Professor McGonagall touched her shoulder. The older witch frowned at the suppressed tears shining in the eyes of one of her favourite students. "Maybe it would be more believable, if it wasn't a Professor that threatened to snap my wand for being an uppity Mudblood," the girl hissed.

Professor McGonagall looked like she'd been slapped and turned to Dumbledore in consternation. His face grave, the headmaster idly waved his hand and the infirmary entrance closed right before Harry reached it. The Boy Who Lived turned back toward the Professors with an icy glare.

"Harry, I would prefer that we could discuss this in a civilized manner," Dumbledore said quietly.

Harry slid his wand back up his sleeve and stiffly walked back toward the Professors. "I'm not sure we really have much to discuss. Professor Snape obviously sets the tone for his house: abusive, bullying, and murderous when given the opportunity." He touched his shirt where the bloody fabric was torn away at the shoulder. "If I hadn't dodged, Draco's cutting charm would have gone through my neck. Instead of talking about that, I'll bet Professor Snape was in your office complaining about the fact that I was able to deflect some non-lethal curses. Draco's part in this whole mess is already being swept under the rug, isn't it? Not to mention Voldemort himself sneaking into the school, and that prophecy he mentioned that you



still won't tell me about." Harry took a deep breath. "Now, Professor, why was it that I should I feel safe here?"

Dumbledore let out a low sigh. "Very well, Harry. I'd wanted to spare you this until you were older, but you deserve to know. Let us adjourn to my office and I will tell you what you want to know."

"No," was all Harry said.

Dumbledore looked at him again. "No?"

"No more secrets. These are my friends, and they deserve to know. They are likely going to be in danger just being around me. Secrets can kill..."

"Very well, Harry," Dumbledore replied. "If that is your wish." He gave a nod toward Madam Pomfrey and she quietly left the room.

Professor McGonagall started to leave, but Harry caught her eye and shook his head. "You may be in the middle the next time he tries to get me. You deserve to know as well." The stern-looking woman stayed, though she looked distinctly uncomfortable.

Dumbledore paused, perhaps hoping that Harry would change his mind. With a resigned expression he closed his eyes and recited the words that had determined Harry's fate. "The Prophecy was made shortly before you were born, Harry. *The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches ... Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies ... And the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not ... And either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives ...*"

The silence that followed was deafening in its intensity. Harry broke it taking a shaky breath, one that wasn't entirely feigned. After everything he had gone through, those simple words still had the power to chill his blood.

"My parents defied him three times?" Harry asked.

Dumbledore nodded. "They fought Voldemort and his Death Eaters on several occasions after they left Hogwarts."

"My parents were Aurors," Neville said in a shocked voice, "they must have fought him at least three times as well. My birthday was at the end of July... C-couldn't this apply to me too?" Harry noticed Luna staring directly at the boy as he spoke.

"That would be possible," Dumbledore agreed, "but Harry was the one Voldemort marked." He slowly pointed toward Harry's scar."

"So it's him or me?" Harry asked.

"Eventually," Dumbledore replied. "That is the only interpretation that makes sense to me."

Harry nodded. "Good."

The look on Dumbledore's face was priceless.

Harry looked him squarely in the eye. *Maybe it's time to show a little more of who I really am.* "The mad bastard's tried to kill me twice. At least now I know why. The Prophecy doesn't say he's guaranteed to win, and I supposedly have some power he can't comprehend." He took a deep breath and his face hardened. "And since he killed my Mum and Dad, I'm glad I'm the one that gets to punch his ticket," he growled. After a moment Harry sighed. "But thank you for telling me. I needed to know."

Harry could feel his friends' eyes on him, but it didn't make him uncomfortable. He knew they had his back covered.

Professor Dumbledore gazed at him thoughtfully. "I'll admit, Harry, this wasn't the reaction I expected."

"Given everything that's happened, I've had to grow up rather quickly," he said with a hint of bitterness.

Dumbledore went rather still, and the twinkling in his eyes faded. Dumbledore glanced at the others and Harry could see the skin around his eyes go tight. "Harry, I –"

Harry cut him off with a wave of his hand. "You thought you were doing the right thing. I can't blame you for that - after all, we *all* make mistakes, don't we?" he said the words calmly, but his eyes met Dumbledore's the whole time. He waited for the feather-light touch of the headmaster's Legilimency, but it never came. *Point for you, old man*, Harry mused.

"Indeed, Harry, you are - unusually mature," Dumbledore replied. Harry couldn't tell if he was hinting or not. "Rest assured that I will do everything in my power to ensure the Prophecy is resolved in your favour."

"I appreciate that, Professor," Harry replied sincerely. "I think the largest question in my mind is how he keeps coming back from the dead. I mean, from what I read the Aurors concluded that the killing curse rebounded on him in 1981. And after I fought him last spring, his spirit seemed to remove itself from Professor Quirrell. What keeps him from passing on?"

"That is indeed, the key issue, Harry. I've done some research on means of cheating death, but I don't have any definitive answers as yet."

Harry didn't even have to look to know that Hermione's eyes were lit up at the implied challenge. "Well then, I suppose we should continue preparing then."

"That would be for the best," the headmaster agreed. "Now if you will forgive me, Professor Lockhart has been waiting for some time now."

After he left, Professor McGonagall stepped into Madam Pomfrey's office. She let the healer know she'd be escorting her students back to the Gryffindor tower.

As they were walking back, Harry broached another subject he'd been debating. "Professor McGonagall?"

"Yes, Mr. Potter?"

"I understand that a faculty sponsor is needed for any sort of official student organization."

McGonagall gave him a sidelong look, but nodded. "That is correct. What kind did you want to start?"

"I was thinking about some sort of permanent duelling club."

"Harry," Ron asked curiously, "aren't we already practicing enough?"

"We are," Harry agreed. "But don't other people need to know how to defend themselves? Look what happened to Cho. Besides, it's not like they're going to learn anything useful from Lockhart."

"Mr. Potter!" the Deputy Headmistress snapped.

"I know, I know. He is a Professor. But seriously, Ma'am, have you ever seen him successfully cast a spell?" Harry asked. "I know we haven't."

Professor McGonagall's lips compressed into a line sharp enough to cut parchment. "What sort of activities would you propose?"

Harry spread his hands in a placating gesture. "Nothing too extreme. Maybe start off on Friday nights, work on basic hexes and jinxes. How to cast accurately. How to dodge. Things like that. I doubt too many older students will be interested, at least at first."

"You might be surprised, Mr. Potter," his head of house responded with just a hint of amusement. "Word of your match with Mr. Malfoy has spread, no doubt growing more exaggerated with each re-telling."

Harry rolled his eyes.

Ron started warming to the idea. "What should we call it then? The Duelling Club?"

Harry smiled. "That seems awfully plain. How about the 'Duelling Association' so we can call it the DA for short?" *Take that, Fate!*

The next day was Friday, with the last classes of the term. Harry was extremely grateful for this, as it seemed that Professor McGonagall's words regarding rumours were quite accurate.

Their morning started off rather poorly. The blizzard had finally begun during the night, and the grounds were already ankle-deep in a white blanket, with more snow spiralling down from the iron-grey sky. After their morning run degenerated into a pratfall festival of slips, slides, and spills, Harry gave it up as a bad job.

He led them to a spot in the courtyard that was partially shielded from the growing drifts for martial arts practice. Unfortunately, without a warm-up run, they were too cold and stiff to do very much. They finally gave up and headed back inside.

Quitting early at least gave them time for an extra-long hot shower before breakfast. Harry half-boiled himself before all the feeling returned to his fingers and toes. When he went down to breakfast, he wore his Weasley jumper under his robes and had the scarf Ginny made him wrapped around his neck.

The moment he entered the Great Hall, the normal quiet conversations among the early-risers ended abruptly. Harry noticed that several people were openly staring at him. The sounds of urgent whispering soon filled the room as they made their way to the Gryffindor table. Harry fought the urge to duck his head.

Fred and George, he noticed, were watching this with great amusement.

"Honestly, I don't see why you're so surprised, Harry," Hermione gently chided him, "You did put on quite a show last night."

"Would you rather he acted like Draco?" Ginny asked tartly. "I suppose you might enjoy him strutting a bit, but I wouldn't."

Hermione stared at Ginny, obviously taken aback.

"One of the reasons Ginny likes Harry so much is because he's so modest," Luna said as she poured herself some juice. "Most wizards who could do what he did would get a very big head about it. Harry acts like he feels uncomfortable when he does something better than the rest of us. Especially you." She took a sip, oblivious to the blush creeping up Ginny's face as well as Harry's. She frowned at Hermione, who was gaping like a fish. "Surely you notice how

reluctant he is to discuss grades until he hears how you did. If he did better, you have to drag the paper out of his hands. It's almost like he feels guilty because he has some unfair advantage." She looked over at Harry and smiled faintly. "Don't let that stop you from beating Draco when the opportunity arises. I rather enjoyed that last night, almost as much as I liked watching Neville."

Harry dodged to the side as Neville sacrificed a mouthful of Pumpkin juice to the gods of the spit-take. He was just glad the food hadn't appeared yet.

Luna turned and looked at Neville. "What?" she cocked her head and stared at the sputtering Longbottom.

"You're doing that on purpose," Ron accused the blond girl.

"Doing what?" she asked innocently. *That couldn't have been a glint in her eye, could it?* Harry wondered.

Unfortunately, Ron's inquiry was fatally distracted by the arrival of breakfast. As they loaded their plates, Harry tried to relax and sit up straight. He'd put up with being the centre of attention before, and usually for far less pleasant reasons. He sighed and bit into a nice warm chipolata.

Ginny, however, was still quiet, and a little red-faced. He took hold of the trailing end of his scarf and brushed it against her arm. She turned toward him so suddenly he had to stop himself from flinching back. "Told you this would be right useful by the end of autumn," he reminded her.

She nodded. "I know, I'm wearing two jumpers under my robes. Any more layers and I won't be able to bend my elbows."

Harry chuckled quietly. "Might be hard to take notes that way," he said airily.

"What are you two talking about?" Ron asked from the other side of his sister.

“Harry agrees that I need to not wear too many clothes,” Ginny said, grinning.

“We’re talking about how cold this rock pile gets in the winter,” Harry corrected her, growling. “Do you really have to wind him up like that?” he asked. “I’m the one that has to go to class with him.”

“Not immediately,” Hermione corrected him. “Herbology was cancelled. The greenhouses are almost snowed under and Professor Sprout is worried about the mandrakes.”

“Yeah, she needs to get something warm to wrap them up,” Neville agreed, his embarrassment forgotten in the warm glow of herbology. “They’re used to a warmer climate than Scotland. I promised to help her this afternoon if she’s still at it.”

“I’ll help too, if you want,” Luna volunteered.

Neville looked at her, a little surprised.

“If I’m going to tease you, I should also be nice at times. That way you’ll be more confused,” she explained.

Neville sent Harry a pleading look.

Harry just shrugged helplessly. “I’m not smart enough to figure out girls. No one is.”

“I’m so glad,” Luna said, beaming. “Are you two glad as well?” she asked Ginny and Hermione.

Hermione just groaned and began massaging her temples. Ginny snorted, then began giggling quietly.

“Mental. All three of them.” Ron muttered. “Absolutely mental.” He jumped, grunting with pain. “What was that for?” he asked, scowling at Hermione.

“If you call me mental one more time, I’ll do more than kick your - shin,” the bushy-haired witch growled.

Ron blanched and then focused exclusively on his food.

Ginny smiled at Harry, who responded by shrugging, but wisely kept his mouth shut.

After they finished eating, the second-years escorted Luna and Ginny to charms, and then retired to their common room in the Gryffindor tower. Ron somehow talked Neville into a game of wizarding chess. Harry watched with some amusement, even though the outcome was practically preordained. The game was very popular with wizarding folk, but Ron could burn anyone out on it - like most of the Gryffindors.

For their last transfiguration class of the term, Professor McGonagall had them turning small metal spheres into Christmas ornaments. He remembered doing this the first time around. He managed to produce a shiny metallic green bauble with a hook that wasn't too embarrassing. But in the aftermath of Justin's petrification and the wild accusations that followed, he'd hung it on the smaller tree in the Gryffindor common room and forgotten about it. Between the whole Polyjuice fiasco and visiting Hermione in the hospital wing, he'd forgotten to retrieve it until after the tree was taken down.

Harry thought the ornament was lost forever, but it wasn't. After they found Ginny's body and Harry woke up at The Burrow - after he rationalized not ending his own life just yet, he'd gone to her room. He didn't know why he did that to himself, but he wanted to feel closer to her, if only in his mind. The room hadn't changed much over the years. Her bed and bureau were there, but her trunk was gone, crushed under the wreckage of the Gryffindor tower. The top of the bureau had a scattering of trinkets. A figurine he'd owed her for her last birthday. A dried flower pressed under glass. A silver hair-clip. And a metallic green ornament. One he'd made before he even noticed her, one that she saved from being discarded and put away as a keepsake of her horrible first year. Holding the worthless bauble like it was the most precious thing in the world, he sat on the foot of her bed, legs too weak to stand, and wept for all he'd lost, and all the time he'd wasted.



Harry blinked, swallowing to dull the prickle in the back of his throat. Ron was frowning at him as McGonagall passed out the spheres. Harry sniffed and coughed loudly to cover up.

“Don’t do that around Mum,” he warned in a low voice. “She hears you cough she’ll have your shirt off and a mustard pack on your chest in an instant.”

“Hmmm...” Harry murmured. “Then I’ll have to tell her I caught it from you and escape in the confusion.”

Ron glared at him. “You need to stop hanging around Fred and George.”

Professor McGonagall frowned at them as she handed them their spheres. They wisely decide to shut it at that point.

Harry glared at his ornament-to-be. He didn’t know what he wanted to make, but it definitely would not be metallic green. He knew they were starting with metal spheres, so whatever they made would be less likely to shatter if dropped or the transfiguration failed horribly. Harry’s Quidditch-obsessed mind immediately thought of another metallic sphere that was roughly the same size. He worked on visualizing exactly what he wanted, adding details and trying to make everything as clear as possible. When he was finally satisfied, he reached for his wand.

When the small puff of smoke cleared, the metal ball was replaced with a Golden Snitch ornament, complete with a hook protruding from the top, between the wings, so it could easily be hung from a tree.

“That’s brilliant, mate,” Ron said in an awed whisper. He hesitantly reached over and touched one of the delicately moulded wings with his fingertip. The limbs immediately blurred into motion and the Snitch ornament slowly rose up from Harry’s desk.

Harry quickly grabbed it before it could get away, but a shocked silence descended around him.

“What’s happening over here?” Professor McGonagall asked, walking toward him. She’d been circulating around the classroom, offering

help to those struggling, and ensuring that the students already finished didn't start acting up.

"P-Professor, Harry animated his ornament," Hermione said in an awed tone.

Harry resisted the urge to hit himself in the forehead. Animating solid objects was a topic in his NEWT-level transfiguration seminar. *Damn, I better just try to dumb it out.*

"Mr. Potter, what did you do to your ornament?" McGonagall looked slightly impressed in spite of herself.

"Er, I'm not completely sure. I was trying to visualize a Snitch, and you know, I never see one when it isn't flapping its wings like mad - it must have just - come out that way." Harry tried to make himself sound as confused as possible. *Crabbe and Goyle would be proud,* he thought happily.

"I - see - Mr. Potter," McGonagall said in a profoundly disapproving voice. She did not sound happy at the idea that Harry just bumbled into creating what originally appeared to be a nice bit of advanced transfiguration.

After she left, Hermione gave Harry a slightly disgusted look. Harry just shrugged sheepishly. *At least this ornament is quite different,* he reflected happily.

By dint of several warming charms, strategically placed *Incendio* spells, and no small amount of brute force, the six of them were able to beat a path from the courtyard to Hagrid's hut that weekend. The groundskeeper and holder of the keys was a little surprised to see them so close to the end of term, but he quickly whipped up some hot tea (which was appreciated) and set out platters of rock cakes (which were politely ignored) and treacle fudge (which only Harry would eat, taking very, very small nibbles and chewing vigorously).

Harry knew the man would be lonely over the holidays, having no real family left, so he talked everyone into coming to see him. Honestly, though, it wasn't that hard. The second years remembered the stories he'd told of their parents, or the tea and encouragement he'd given

when Snape was being beastly. He'd also evidently hit it off with Ginny and Luna during their trip across the lake. He promised Luna he'd provide a breeding ground for Crumple-Horned Snorkacks if she and her father could bring back a breeding pair, so he was first rate in her book.

Harry, Ron, and Ginny clubbed up to get a new collar for Fang, made of dragon hide with metal fittings. Neville got him a new hat, since his old one was sporting an increasing number of holes and chew marks. Hermione gave him a book on Muggle veterinary treatments, since some of his charges were very sensitive to magic. Luna gave him a year's subscription to The Quibbler, so he could stay on top of new species discoveries that seem to happen unusually often these days.

Hagrid was clearly touched and surprised. In no time he was starting to sound congested. As they bid him goodbye, Harry whispered "I look through that album almost every night."

Hagrid's hand on his shoulder nearly brought Harry to his knees.

After Monday breakfast they loaded up their trunks and made their way down to the snowy courtyard. Hermione became very popular with the shivering first year students, as she would cast a warming charm on anyone who asked her. Harry was glad Draco was staying at Hogwarts for the holidays, and wasn't there to see Matt Harper, a Slytherin first year student politely thanking Hermione. *Can't have anyone ruining their image as a house full of complete bastards, now can we?* Harry reflected wryly.

Harry was in such a good mood that he just smiled and nodded when Colin Creevey asked to take another picture. Ginny was sitting on her trunk nearby, so Harry sat down next to her and posed. Colin fooled around with the camera for a moment, then snapped the picture. Harry smiled at Ginny, who looked slightly cross, then got up to see what Ron and Neville were arguing about.

The two of them were working out the details with Hermione on when they could get together and exchange gifts over the break. They finally agreed to try for some time between Boxing Day and New Year's Eve.

Harry looked up in time to see Colin running from Ginny, who'd just pasted him in the back of the head with a snowball. The fleeing first year unfortunately ran right past Ron, who hooked an arm around the smaller boy.

"Is there some reason my sister is angry at you?" Ron asked in a falsely cheery tone.

"No! I don't know! I mean - I *said* something, but I don't understand why she got mad." Colin looked back and forth between Ron and Harry. "I just took a picture of Harry and her sitting together and I told her you two make a good couple for portraiture. Your colours contrast well, and you two are roughly the same size..." his voice ran down as Harry's face went pink. "I didn't mean anything else," he added quickly. Then he wriggled out of Ron's grip and got into the line to board the next carriage. Ron just chuckled at his friend.

One by one, the thestral-drawn carriages arrived and ferried them to the train station. As soon as their trunks were stowed, they claimed the last compartment. The idling train was a bit cold, even with warming charms, as they were out of the sunlight now, and the metal walls and hard seats seemed to leech the warmth from their bodies. It wasn't long before Luna was sitting on Neville's lap again. From the redness of his face, it seemed her solution was warming him up as well. Harry wrapped his cloak over himself like a blanket, but soon realized that Ginny had left hers in her trunk when they boarded the train.

To his credit, Harry tried to offer it to her. She was noticeably smaller than he was, and logically would be more affected by the cold. Ginny sighed theatrically and got up. To his surprise, she sat down next to him and wrapped the trailing edge of the cloak around herself and leaned against him. Ron and Hermione had both kept their cloaks, but they were soon leaning against each other as well.

There must have been some problem with the boarding, because they sat there for a good half hour before the train finally jerked into motion. The warm air that finally wafted from the vents was very welcome, and soon Harry found himself drifting off to sleep.

Harry awoke when the train jolted as it slowed. He was quite warm for a change, though he wished the reason was a little different. Ginny was still curled up under his cloak, only now she was burrowed into his side, and his arm somehow ended up wrapped around her shoulders. He froze when he realized what a compromising position he was in. *Thank Merlin everyone else is asleep as well*, he thought as his panic ebbed.

As gently as possible, he attempted to extract himself. Unfortunately, Ginny had a firm grip on his robes, so he had no choice but to wake her. He tapped her on the shoulder, hoping and praying that she didn't let out a yell. He was tempted to put a hand over her mouth, but didn't want to risk panicking her. As it was, Ginny's eyes snapped open and she flinched back from his side like he was on fire. She opened her mouth to speak, but Harry shushed her before she could wake the others.

Ron and Hermione were still leaning against each other. Ron was snoring lightly (for him), but Hermione didn't seem to be disturbed by that. Luna was curled up on Neville's lap, but for once he didn't look petrified. Instead, he was faintly smiling, and more surprising, had both his arms wrapped around the blond girl.

"I can see we're almost there, but I still need to use the necessary," Ginny whispered as she stood up.

"All right," Harry said. "Give me a minute." Ginny looked at him oddly as he stood up, wincing as his back popped and his muscles twitched. "What? I'm not letting you go off by yourself, no matter how close we are to King's Cross."

Ginny sighed and rolled her eyes.

"Do I need to repeat back the things you said to me when I complained to Ron?" Harry asked her, smirking.

"All right Harry, you've made your point," she said as she reached for the compartment door. She tried to unlatch it, but it slid open at her touch.

"That's odd," Harry said, frowning.

“Maybe Ron didn’t get it completely latched,” Ginny speculated.

“No, I’m pretty sure I heard it engage,” Harry said. He looked back at his friends slumbering in the compartment. Nothing appeared to be out of place. He shrugged. “Let’s get going before they wake up.”

A/N:

Well, here’s another chapter... this one was surprisingly hard to write. (Not sure why though.) Things are diverging even more from the old timeline, and now Harry is starting to have trouble sorting out all the ripples. Things are starting to get tense as the battle lines are slowly drawn.

If Draco seems a little more powerful than in canon, keep in mind that Harry stood up to him a lot more last year. That gave him some powerful motivation to practice his curses over the summer. Lucius is also not happy to hear of some scruffy half-blood facing down his heir. Harry’s anger and refusal to back down is escalating the tensions on more than one front. (Just ask Snape!)

I’m glad you all seemed to enjoy the Extreme Quidditch. I don’t expect Harry to play quite that dirty against anyone but Slytherin. He actually feels bad for Cedric and Cho now.

Several people have asked about Sirius’ will. When he was arrested in 1981, he’d been kicked out of the Black family, and his most significant asset was his motorbike. Mrs. Black (his Mum) died in 1986, thinking Sirius was a martyr to the Black family values, so she did not block his inheritance as the last of the Blacks. He’s been in Azkaban all this time, and may not even be aware of his inheritance, nor had access to a lawyer to even write a will. The Ministry is not too keen on observing the rights of prisoners, otherwise Sirius might have gotten a proper trial.

In response to some comments recently posted on JKR’s site... wand cores – since Phoenix’s are so rare, this means all of wizarding Britain would have one of two cores, which seems odd. Perhaps the wand makers use local materials, but stock wands made by other craftsmen, so as to find better matches for their customers. Neville and Luna – yes, in canon perhaps just friends, but this altered Neville

is not quite as easy to alarm, and this Luna isn't quite as aggressively spacey. Sorting Hat horcrux – she posted that after I already started writing this, and I made the decision not to go back and do a major re-write. This will all be AU when Book 7 comes out anyway, right?

Plot discussions and individual Q&A will be addressed on my yahoo group (viridiandreams, see my author profile for the link) A lot of interesting discussions are taking place there as well.

Thanks for reading!

-Matthew

## Chapter 23

Ron and Hermione were starting to stir as Harry and Ginny returned to the compartment. Harry could tell they awoke simultaneously, because they both visibly cringed and immediately sat up, ramrod straight on the bench. The shuffling and coughing awoke Neville as well. The normally shy boy couldn't react as the others, because Luna was still curled up on his lap, dead to the world. His face became a bit pink as he waited for someone to say something. Fortunately, Ron and Hermione were a little distracted by their own embarrassment, while Harry just shrugged and returned to his seat.

Ginny followed him and sat down beside him. She began rubbing her hands together and accepted Harry's cloak with a grateful nod. Harry just smiled lazily. The persistent cold, followed by sudden warmth had left everyone sleepy and lazy, even after their unplanned nap. He felt ashamed to admit it, but it was also a relief to be away from Hogwarts for a while. Between the hostile professors and friendly ones that were just a little too observant, it had been a very stressful term. He was enjoying just sitting there like a lump and refusing to worry about things, at least until they got off the train.

As the Hogwarts Express entered London, Luna finally stirred and stretched. She smiled lazily and stood up.

"Thank you Neville," she said softly.

"Er, yes, well, uh, you're welcome," Neville replied. Harry wasn't sure if he could have kept a straight face if his friend replied 'It was my pleasure.'

Luna sat down beside the flustered boy and folded her hands primly in her lap. "You were much warmer than the seat," she said.

Neville didn't look like he knew how to reply to that. He merely said nothing and crossed his arms. Harry wondered if he suddenly felt a little colder as well.

When the train finally came to a halt, Harry and the others rose to their feet and began shuffling up the corridor. Ron was extremely



careful with the carrier, but Crookshanks was evidently in a foul mood. The large cat hissed every time his container shifted the slightest bit.

Their trunks had been loaded directly from their carriage to the luggage car, located directly behind the engine. It took quite a while for them to make their way up the train, and then they found the passageway blocked.

Harry frowned at the matronly woman who normally pushed the refreshment cart. He didn't recall seeing her this time, but maybe she looked in on them while they were asleep and didn't want to disturb them.

"Come on, luvs," she said in a bored voice, "there's going to be a slight delay. Go ahead and exit onto the platform for right now, there's a good lad."

Harry frowned but moved as she directed and stepped down onto the platform. The cold December air seemed to pry cold fingers into his cloak. After a moment, he whipped it off and wrapped it around Ginny.

"Harry!" she objected.

"Hush, you," he said quietly. "I can get by for a while with just a warming charm." He was reaching for his wand when he felt a sudden rush of warmth. When he turned around, Hermione was just putting away her wand.

"Just keeping in practice," she said with a knowing smile. Her eyes strayed toward Ginny and her grin got a little wider.

Harry felt a little embarrassed by that look and was about to object when Ron interrupted.

"We aren't supposed to use magic out of school, Hermione!" the redhead hissed.

Harry knew Ron was just worried she'd get into trouble, but seeing Ron nag Hermione about following the rules was simply weirding him out.

“Ronald,” Hermione said with a slight sigh, “The notices said that we aren’t allowed to use magic at home over the holidays. We aren’t home. This is an area full of adult wizards, as well as being concealed from Muggles. Even if the Ministry wanted to, I’m not sure they could track down every bit of magic used here.”

Ron was still frowning, but evidently decided to let it drop. Harry wondered if subtly coaching Ron to more closely observe people’s actions was the cause, but he was grateful for his friend’s increasing restraint. This was especially true where Hermione was concerned. Over the long years of war, the three of them had laughed about how clueless Ron and Hermione had been when they were younger, Ron even admitting he’d been the worst. It was a melancholy humour, gentle but painful, as they recalled happier years and all the friends they’d lost. No matter how fond their memories of previous spats, Ron and Hermione always had a faintly wistful air to them. Hunting down the Horcruxes was not a safe occupation, and all of them were acutely aware of their own mortality. Harry’s friends lived each day like it could be their last, but they always seemed to regret the lost time and missed opportunities of their Hogwarts years.

Despite Harry’s best efforts, there was no guarantee things would go any better this time. Harry was the only one left who understood how fragile all their lives were, and he wasn’t going to let them waste any of it.

Harry snapped out of his reverie when someone called his name. Mrs. Weasley emerged from the crowd. Trailing Percy, Fred, and George, she apologized as she jostled a middle-aged wizard in teal robes. Despite her harried expression, she smiled at the six of them standing together on the platform.

“You poor dears must be starving!” she huffed. “The stationmaster sent word that the train had been delayed leaving Hogsmeade, some sort of trouble with the luggage car, and the rails weren’t in good enough condition for them to make up the time. Now let’s get you home and get lunch on the table.”

Ron frowned. “Er, Mum, can we wait for the Grangers? If the train’s been delayed, they might not know where to find us.”

Molly Weasley eyed her youngest son for a moment, noting the odd look Hermione had given him as well. "That's very thoughtful, Ron. I suppose if *you* can stand to put off lunch, then we can wait a few moments. Now, Harry, where is your cloak? You'll catch your death out here!"

"He gave it to me, Mum," Ginny said crossly. "I left mine in my trunk because I thought the train would be too warm."

"Oh dear! Ginny, the Express doesn't have any heat unless it's moving. Now why didn't your brothers tell you..." Her voice trailed off as she scowled at Ron. Then she sighed and glared at Fred and George.

"I didn't ride the express last winter, Mum," Ron said quickly. "And we boarded separately from Fred and George, so they didn't have a chance to warn her."

The Weasley twins exchanged glances. Harry supposed they were shocked that Ron spoke up to keep them out of trouble, rather than sitting back to watch the show. "Hermione put a warming charm on me, so I should be all right for a while. Did they say what happened to the luggage car?" He didn't know why, but he was starting to feel a little uneasy. Things were going on that didn't make any sense, at least not to him anyway. He didn't know if the Hogwarts Express had been delayed in the original timeline or not.

"No, dear, they didn't. But one of the guards mentioned waiting for Aurors to show up," Molly replied, frowning. "They said they would deliver your trunks by Floo if it took much longer."

"That's quite all right," Harry said quickly as his stomach dropped toward his shoes. The Diary was inside his trunk. If something happened to that - he didn't want to think about the consequences. The pistol would also be hard to explain, if a bit less catastrophic to lose. The same could be said for his invisibility cloak, though his photo album was important more for sentimental reasons.

His friends went quiet, as if they sensed the tension in Harry. "Let's move over toward the car," Neville suggested. "That way we'll be able to see when they open it up."

By this time, the empty passenger cars had been unhooked and pulled back. Harry couldn't get a good look at the door the refreshment cart woman had blocked them from. But a brief glimpse revealed that the latch had scorch marks all around it.

A fair crowd of trunk-less students had gathered at this point. After a whispered consultation, the Aurors began carrying out the trunks, one by one. Each one was given a quick once-over and then the tags were read aloud so they could be claimed.

Ron and Ginny's trunks surfaced first. Ginny quickly opened hers and retrieved her cloak. She returned Harry's cloak to him, blushing with embarrassment. He smiled at her and shrugged without saying anything, and for some reason that made her even more flustered. She turned to Hermione and began asking her questions about transfiguration. The bushy-haired witch's eyes lit up as she began holding forth on one of her favourite subjects.

Harry turned back toward the train with a smile. Inside, his stomach was still trembling with dread. A familiar-looking trunk emerged from the car and was being inspected by the Ministry employees. One of them was peering closely at something and suddenly straightened with a muffled oath. Harry stepped forward, bracing himself for bad news, and the startled man stared at him.

"Harry Potter?" he asked.

"Yes, is there a problem?" he answered, struggling to keep the edge out of his voice.

"N-no, no problem," the man replied, smiling now. "I suppose you would be old enough to be going to Hogwarts, wouldn't you?"

Harry nodded.

"I attended Hogwarts with your father, James. M'name's Rory Pratchett," he said, extending his hand.

Harry shook his hand calmly. He tried not to resent the man for inadvertently scaring him out of half a year's growth. "Pleased to meet you," he said.

“Pleasure’s all mine. James was a couple of years older than me, but when he was Head Boy he got me out of a bad situation with a couple of Slytherins that were about to do me some damage,” he said with a smile. “Your father never was one to back down from anything. He stunned them both before he even thought about taking house points.”

Harry laughed out loud. He hadn’t heard many stories about his father, let alone positive ones. This tale was completely new to him.

“I see you never heard about that; that doesn’t surprise me a bit.” He leaned forward a little and lowered his voice to a whisper. “I read that article. If you think *he* is innocent, that’s good enough for me. There’s a few of us that aren’t looking for your father’s best friend as hard as we could be.”

Harry nodded, relieved. He just hoped Sirius had actually escaped.

“Well, Mr. Potter,” Auror Pratchett said in his normal voice, “everything seems to be in order here. Enjoy your holiday!”

“I will, thank you!” Harry was too relieved to find the lock on his trunk intact to keep from smiling. As all the trolleys seemed occupied, he popped open the latches and retrieved the clip-on wheels he’d purposely left packed near the top. He wanted to check a few other things, but now was not the time. In thirty seconds he was easily pulling his heavy trunk up to the others.

“Good thing Dad isn’t here,” Fred chortled. “One look at those wheels and he’d be ecstatic.”

Harry shrugged. “Right useful until I can legally do a levitation charm. Don’t have to worry about the Muggles outside, either.”

“Too true,” George agreed. He exchanged glances with his brother. “We’ve been looking at some Muggle alternatives for... certain aspects... of our vocation. You interested in doing some consulting?”

Harry frowned, assailed by images of Fred and George studying for Holy Orders. Then the light dawned. “Ah, pranking.”

“Well of course,” Fred replied. “Some things work just as well as a potion, and better yet are magically non-reactive.”

“Our last prank war with Bill showed us a few things to consider. Trying to slip something past a professional curse-breaker takes some doing. Towards the end, he was checking for magical residue on everything around him.” George shook his head at their eldest brother’s paranoia.

“Ginny’s water bucket over the door idea worked like a charm though,” Fred reminded him.

“That it did, oh brother of mine, that it did. Anyway, we figure at some point we will again want to go after... bigger game. As such, it might be handy to have some completely non-magical tricks up our sleeves.” George waggled his eyebrows in such an exaggerated manner that Harry could only snort to keep from laughing out loud.

Harry had few illusions about what ‘bigger game’ might be - Snape being the most likely guess. While he wholeheartedly approved of the target, he wasn’t sure their Occlumency was up to keeping his involvement secret. On the other hand, Fred and George were awfully good at covering their tracks. Without some physical proof, the potions master couldn’t punish them too severely. The Hogwarts Board of Governors could hardly afford to acknowledge the man’s use of Legilimency on students, let alone expel two of them based upon it. Knowing they’d done it and being unable to do anything about it would probably irk the man even worse.

There was also the possibility that Dolores Umbridge might cross their path in the future. Harry couldn’t imagine anything worse than the pranking nightmare the twins unleashed on the usurping headmistress.

But that didn’t mean he shouldn’t try.

Harry smiled as the twins looked expectantly at him. “All right, I’m game,” he said and their eyes lit with glee. “But only if the target deserves it.” That calmed them down a bit.

"I suppose you still want to make peace with perfect prefect Percy?" Fred asked, a trifle sourly.

Harry hoped he could head off the rift that might be coming in a couple of years after the ambitious boy graduated and began working at the Ministry. "Yes, I am. One enemy at a time, gentlemen. And there are far more deserving targets, yes?"

George elbowed his twin and they both nodded, albeit Fred a bit reluctantly.

By this time everyone's trunks had made it off the train, all of them appearing to be intact. Molly talked to one of the Aurors who'd apparently worked with Arthur a few years ago. When Luna's trunk was offloaded, she said goodbye and made the man promise to come around for supper some evening soon.

The Weasley matriarch led them away from the crowd gathered around the damaged car. Harry idly wondered if she'd been a military officer in a previous life. She definitely had voice of command down pat, as she demonstrated whenever Fred and George began acting up.

Once they were clear of the press, Hermione spotted her parents and waved. The Grangers looked a little less surprised to see their daughter standing in the middle of a large group of students. From what he'd heard, Harry knew that Hermione never had a lot of friends before, and never any that were really close. Mrs. Granger looked happy, while Mr. Granger frowned thoughtfully. *Maybe he's happy she isn't the only girl in our little clique now*, Harry mused as his friend introduced Ginny and Luna to her parents. He was just glad Luna smiled and nodded without saying anything.

The blond first year evidently had other things on her mind. As the Grangers left amid hurried goodbyes, Luna walked right up to Augusta Longbottom and held out her hand as she introduced herself. Neville's tall, forbidding grandmother stared down at the cherubic first year girl, who was little more than half her height. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw Neville standing rooted to the spot.

The head of the Longbottom family wasn't scowling - quite. But Luna just continued to stand there, hand outstretched, smiling up at her. After a very long moment, Mrs. Longbottom unfolded one of her hands from around her purse and gravely shook hands with the girl. "Augusta Longbottom. Lovegood..." she said slowly. "Does your father work at, what was the name of that?"

"He's the editor of The Quibbler," Luna supplied helpfully.

"I see," Augusta replied.

"Well, it was very nice to meet you Ma'am," Luna said. She turned and walked over to Neville, who was blinking rapidly. "I hope to see you after Boxing Day," she said. With that she went up on her toes and kissed him on the cheek. Harry wasn't sure if she whispered something else into his ear, but he did know that Neville's face had gone very pink.

Luna sat down on her trunk as Neville and his Gran left. Harry and the rest bid them goodbye, but it was a little subdued after Luna's performance. Mrs. Longbottom assured her grandson that there would be opportunities for him to visit after the Longbottom clan's Christmas gathering.

After they left, Molly asked Luna if she saw her father.

"Oh, he's not coming. He has to work, but he showed me how to catch the Knight Bus before I left for Hogwarts," the girl replied. "I just wanted to meet Neville's Gran, and you all are very interesting. But if you're leaving now, I'll be going."

Molly's eyes flashed, but she held back from saying anything negative about the girl's father. "That's all right then. We'll all be taking the bus then."

"Why aren't we using the Anglia?" Ron asked.

"Because it's a lot of bother. It's not like the Knight Bus is that expensive," she replied evasively. It was the first time Harry had heard Molly Weasley advocate splurging on something like that. He



suspected she wasn't as comfortable driving a Muggle automobile as her husband, but he wisely refrained from commenting on this.

Ron seemed to have picked up on this as well, and also let it drop.

In short order they were careening through the streets of London in a breakneck fashion. As they rode the Knight Bus back toward Ottery Saint Catchpole, Molly explained that the Hogwarts Express had been delayed because someone tried to break into the luggage car. The door was spelled against simple charms, like *Alohomora*, but the burglar then resorted to cruder means and tried to blast the lock apart. The door was heavily damaged, but none of the trunks appeared to have been tampered with.

Harry fretted about the Diary until he noticed the others were frowning at him. Even Luna was peering at him with her protuberant blue eyes. At that point he took a deep breath and tried to make himself relax. Hopefully his friends would chalk it up to 'things Harry can't talk about until we master Occlumency' and leave it alone before Molly became concerned. The fact that his trunk was undamaged was reassuring, but Harry knew that was no guarantee.

Mrs. Weasley had a word with Ernie, the driver, as they boarded. She then sat down next to Luna. Harry wondered about this, until he noticed the Knight Bus roar past the path to The Burrow. When they did stop, it was on the outskirts of the village itself, in front of a slightly run-down looking house with overgrown flowerbeds. Luna bounced to her feet and Harry realized this must be her home. *I shouldn't be surprised*, he reflected. *Molly's always looking out for any kids she runs into – I should know as well as anyone*. He looked over at Ron and they both stood up and helped Luna wrestle her trunk to the front door before Mrs. Weasley could say anything.

She did, however, give them both a proud smile as they re-boarded the bus. Ron tried to act blasé, but his ears were red.

The bus didn't have anyone else heading for the village, so the next stop was at the end of the two-track lane leading to The Burrow. Harry and the Weasleys disembarked with the normal chaos this entailed. When they were finally situated on the roadside and the bus left, Molly carefully looked around in the cold December afternoon.

Finally, she pulled out her wand and tapped each of their trunks. When Harry shifted the bulky luggage, he found it was considerably lighter.

With that, they made their way to The Burrow. Mrs. Weasley started a pot of soup and told them they could come down for sandwiches after they carried their trunks upstairs. Harry was anxious to check on a few things, so he didn't join into the chorus of groans this announcement provoked. He was up the stairs in little more than a minute, and threw open his trunk.

Nothing seemed to have been disturbed, and his father's cloak was folded to one side. Harry let out a relieved sigh and stuck his arm down the corner and felt around the bottom under some of his clothes. His fingers brushed the cold barrel of the Glock before they closed around the worn cover of Tom Riddle's journal. Harry sagged against the side of his trunk before Ron's voice made him jump.

"All right, Harry?"

"Yeah, mate. Everything's fine."

"You've been doing a fair impression of Nearly Headless Nick since we got off the train," his friend observed.

"I've got some things in my trunk I can't afford to lose," Harry said carefully. "For example, can you imagine the disaster if we'd lost the Occlumency manual?"

Ron frowned. "We've pretty much got the theory down by now, it's just practice we need."

Harry bit his lip. "I was just using that as an example. I've got some other books and things that I was worried about."

Ron sighed. "I know there's more you aren't telling me, Harry. As soon as you can't break through our Occlumency, you need to tell us."

"I will, Ron," Harry replied honestly. "And with great relief, I might add."

Ron chuckled and dragged his trunk up to the foot of his bed. "We better get back downstairs or Fred and George won't leave us a crumb."

When Mr. Weasley came home from work, he had a broad smile as his children greeted him. Harry thought he looked a bit tired and worn. He was glad Arthur was looking into Sirius' situation, but he felt guilty as he wondered how much extra work he'd inadvertently piled onto the man.

Dinner-time conversation was dominated by questions about how their term had gone. Molly had very little to complain about with the marks, barring Fred and George, of course. Ron was horribly embarrassed that he **and** Percy were being favourably contrasted with their twin brothers. Harry knew that almost guaranteed a thorough pranking before holiday was over. Mrs. Weasley was also pleased to announce that Bill had been called in by Joshua Carpenter to assist with a tricky bit of warding near Vladivostok. The job paid extremely well, even if it did mean he'd be several time zones away for Christmas.

On the other hand, Mrs. Weasley was extremely disappointed in their universal contempt for Gilderoy Lockhart. Even Percy agreed with them, given the antipathy that most of their teachers held for the Defence professor.

"But I don't understand, he's written so many books..." her voice trailed off as Harry shook his head.

"We think they were mostly fabricated," he said soberly.

Ron began a slightly exaggerated re-telling of the whole Cornish Pixie fiasco that had Mr. Weasley trying hard to stifle his laughter. When his son got to the part where Harry back-fisted a pixie into Lockhart's face, the man excused himself and quickly exited the kitchen.

A somewhat betrayed-looking Mrs. Weasley stared after her husband before turning back to her children, both born and adopted. "But why would he take a teaching position if he can't do it? It just doesn't make any sense."

“I think he’s just doing it for the publicity,” Harry answered. “Plus, he’s made every student attending Hogwarts buy all of his books. I think he also wanted to make some kind of partnership to use my name as well. He was a little too frank in one of our little ‘chats’ outside of class.” Harry then gave a rather detailed synopsis of his private talks with the gormless glory hound.

When he was done, Molly’s eyes had gone very hard, like frozen marbles. She got up from the table and went over to the fireplace. She pulled several books from the stack on the mantle, then opened up one of the kitchen cabinets and removed several more. When she was done, she chucked the stack into the fire.

Fred and George rose to their feet and gave their Mum a standing ovation.

“Oh, stop it you two,” she snapped.

“He’s fooled a lot of people, Mum,” Ron said, trying to cheer her up.

“Including Dumbledore,” Harry added dryly.

“They have a point there, Molly” Mr. Weasley said from the doorway. “No use beating yourself up about it.”

Soon after that, they were sent up to bed. Harry had a suspicion that Mr. and Mrs. Weasley wanted some privacy to talk about a few things.

For various reasons, Harry had never had the chance to experience a ‘normal’ Christmas with the Weasleys. The atmosphere at Twelve Grimmauld Place had been rather strained, to say the least. Subsequent years, when they tried to celebrate the holidays, there were always distractions – like hoping no one was killed. That always put a damper on the festive spirit.

With all of their children away at school, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley delayed putting up their holiday decorations until they were home. The morning after their arrival, Mr. Weasley took a day off from work and led them through the woods outside Ottery Saint Catchpole. Harry thought his guardian looked a little odd hiking through the woods with an axe balanced on his shoulder, but he followed along

with Ron, Fred, George, and Percy. The eldest boy was burdened with a coil of rope.

Mr. Weasley had evidently made some prior arrangement with the Muggle farmer who owned this plot of land, because he soon led them to a rather prominent evergreen, marked with a red ribbon tied around it in a bow.

“Nice tree, Dad,” Ron said in an awed voice.

“It should be,” Mr. Weasley agreed with a smile. “Cost us a case of your Mum’s best preserves.”

It took nearly half an hour for Arthur Weasley to cut the tree down, and another fifteen minutes to carefully wrap it in the ropes. By that time, Harry was more than happy to help haul it back across the snowy ground; anything to get his blood moving again.

Harry didn’t think the large tree would fit in the sitting room at The Burrow, but it did. Or else the ceiling raised itself a bit. Either way, it was (barely) able to sit upright. Molly had Percy and George bring down several boxes of ornaments from the attic, and they all began decorating the evergreen.

With all of them helping, it didn’t take long at all. Harry was rather wishing he’d thought to bring the Snitch ornament he’d made in Transfiguration, instead of leaving it tethered to the tree set up in the Gryffindor common room.

It was then that a final small box was opened, and each member of the Weasley family removed a single ornament. They all looked quite different, and Harry was wondering what was going on when Mrs. Weasley tapped him on the shoulder.

Harry turned around and raised his eyebrows when she handed him the fluttering Snitch ornament. He turned to Ron, who was holding his own ornament from Transfiguration, a miniature replica of the Quidditch Cup that received an approving nod from Professor McGonagall.

“Just following orders, mate,” his friend said, smiling.

“All of us had Professor McGonagall for Transfiguration, Harry,” Mrs. Weasley said. “It’s become almost a tradition for her to have her second year classes create a simple ornament right before holiday. There’s a little bit of yourself in something you create like that, so we always hang those up last.”

One by one, starting with Mr. Weasley, they hung their ornaments on the tree. Ron’s father hung up what looked like a Wizarding chess knight, and Harry got an idea where Ron came by his fascination with the game.

Mrs. Weasley was next with a silver frame that enclosed a small Wizarding photograph. Inside was a pink-cheeked red-headed girl, flanked by twin brothers with auburn hair. After a moment, Harry realized that it wasn’t Ginny, Fred, and George. Though they were quite a bit younger, Harry recognized Gideon and Fabian Prewitt from the old Order of the Phoenix photograph that Alastor Moody had shown him. Molly sniffed quietly after hanging it on the tree, and her fingers lingered on the glass over her brothers’ faces.

*She never really got over losing them,* Harry thought, remembering the Boggart at Twelve Grimmauld Place, and Molly habitually carrying her clock from room to room... no matter that every hand was stuck to ‘Mortal Peril’ like it had been glued there. His heart wrenched with two entirely separate emotions. The first was compassion for Mrs. Weasley. For all her overbearing and overprotective ways, she was merely acting out of the same grief and worry that drove Harry as well. They were more alike than he’d ever guessed. The second feeling was an even more intense hate for Voldemort. He would never know how many families he’d destroyed, how many hearts he’d maimed. Just the thought of a single man being responsible for so much suffering made Harry question whether it was a good thing that magic even existed.

Of course, Harry realized, some Muggles managed quite a bit of evil without a single charm or spell. Hitler was a good example, though there were hints in the books he’d read that Grindelwald was involved in the Third Reich to some extent. Still, it was a disquieting thought, the power that magic could give a single man who was ruthless enough to misuse it.

Harry snapped out of his reverie when Ron nudged him. His friend had just hung his Quidditch Cup ornament, and Harry was the youngest of the boys. Feeling a little self-conscious, Harry found an unobtrusive twig that was sticking out and used the string attached to the hook to tie the Snitch securely in place. When he let go of it, it began flying in small circles near the end of the twig, which had Ron snorting with suppressed laughter. Ginny's eyes were bright as well, but she managed to maintain a discreet silence, which Harry appreciated to no end.

Percy, on the other hand, was frowning. "You know you really shouldn't be doing magic out of school. I won't say anything," he said drawing himself up a bit pompously, "since I know you just wanted everyone to see how you originally made it. But reanimating it does count as magic use, you know."

Harry didn't want to draw any more attention to the blasted thing, so he just nodded. Ron, on the other hand, was indignant. "Harry didn't do a thing, Percy; it's still going from when he made it."

It wasn't for lack of reason that Percy was known as the most studious Weasley. His head snapped around to stare at Harry. "You made those ornaments on Friday. You mean to tell me it's been moving for *four* days now?"

Harry shrugged helplessly. "Yeah, I know. It just... happened. Professor McGonagall was annoyed when I couldn't tell her how I did it."

Ron laughed. "Too right; she went from looking almost happy to wanting to hex you on the spot."

Harry was rather grateful that Ron's humorous summation distracted everyone away from what Harry had done when he transfigured the ornament. During dinner, however, he noticed that Percy would watch him from the corner of his eye as they ate. Harry knew he shouldn't be too surprised. The boy really should have been in Ravenclaw with his girlfriend Penelope. He knew that even semi-permanent animation was hideously difficult and required a lot of magical energy if the materials were not properly prepared. It was a little... odd for someone to do it by accident.

Harry wondered how many slips like that he could make before he garnered more unfavourable attention than he could deal with.

The following day was the last one before Christmas Eve, and Mr. Weasley headed back to work to 'tie up a few loose ends' before the holidays. According to him, each Christmas brought a new wrinkle that cropped up for his department, usually involving enchanted toys. As he headed for the fireplace, however, he gave Harry a subtle wink.

In his last letter to Mr. Weasley before end of term, Harry mentioned overhearing an interesting conversation between Draco Malfoy and his cronies. Phrases like 'Dark Arts artefacts' and 'secret chamber under the drawing-room floor' were the most interesting. Harry didn't know for sure if Lucius already had it, but he threw in a warning about the poisoned dagger concealed in the cane as well. Fate seemed to be a little too fond of repeating itself, given half a chance. If Lucius were furious about being discovered, then Harry didn't want Arthur Weasley to die at the man's hand... again. It did, however, delay the raid while he cajoled a couple of extra Aurors into accompanying him and Perkins. Evidently, today was the day.

"Good luck with your loose ends," Harry said, which earned him a smile.

Fred, George, and Percy were able to do their Christmas shopping on Hogsmeade weekends. As such, they stayed home with the fire and the eggnog, while Mrs. Weasley escorted Harry, Ron, and Ginny as they braved the holiday crowds at Diagon Alley.

Harry was forcibly reminded of how tense things got after the Tri-Wizard tournament. The huge crowd of witches and wizards buying things for Christmas... well, it would have been far too tempting a target for Voldemort and his Death Eaters after the second war began.

Not that Mrs. Weasley was willing to let them completely out of her sight, Christmas shopping or not. They all simply visited one shop at a time, and separated once they were inside. Once their purchases were made, they'd proceed to the exit where Mrs. Weasley would be waiting.



This worked fine for the bigger shops, but for the really small ones, they simply went in one at a time... and then only if they were buying for one of the people present on the expedition.

Harry would have chafed a bit at how careful Molly was being... it wasn't like they were completely helpless. But then he remembered the expression on her face while she stared at her brothers in her ornament and his resentment withered away. Ron and Ginny seemed accustomed to this level of supervision, so Harry surmised that she'd always been that way. He abruptly felt a little worse about talking Ginny into leaving with him during their trip to Diagon Alley last summer.

He was glad he'd splurged a little on her present. He noticed that Molly's cloak was getting a little frayed, so he'd purchased a new one for her, sturdy wool with a silk lining, and spelled against wind and rain. For the most part though, Harry kept his purchases modest. A set of Keeper's pads for Ron, a copper hair-clip for Ginny, some potions ingredients for Fred and George, and Flourish and Blotts credits for Hermione and Percy. Mr. Weasley told Harry that the information on Lucius Malfoy was the best gift he could imagine, but Harry still picked up a socket wrench set from the ironmongers down the street from the Leaky Cauldron.

Harry was pleasantly surprised when Mrs. Weasley told him that she'd invited Remus Lupin over for Christmas dinner. She said he looked like he could use a good home-cooked meal, but Harry knew better. From the letters, Harry could tell the Weasleys often talked to the man regarding Sirius, and Harry also knew the man was usually alone for the holidays. He thanked her despite her protests and for Lupin he picked up a set of robes, inexpensive but at least new. Harry didn't know if Remus Lupin would still become his Defence teacher, but he didn't want Draco or anyone else dismissing the man over his wardrobe.

Ginny was very secretive in her purchases, while Ron spent an inordinate amount of time in the sweets shop. When he emerged with a stack of parcels, announcing he was done, Harry just had to laugh. At least Ron had good taste in chocolate.

By dinner time they had their presents wrapped and safely placed under the tree. Fred and George, of course, made a big production out of trying to figure out what was in each package. Their guesses were also slightly humorous digs at everyone. Ron's ears went red when they guessed he'd wrapped was guessed to be either Quidditch-related or chocolate. Percy went very quiet when they guessed he'd purchased rulebooks of some sort for everyone. Ginny just glared when they suggested she'd bought Harry a book of poems.

Harry wasn't sure what that was all about, but that prompted him to join in the conversation as they waited for Mr. Weasley to come home for dinner. The fact that he was a little worried about his guardian also didn't hurt. "I suppose she should have bought you two a sense of humour," he suggested dryly.

"Now, now, Harrikins," Fred gently remonstrated, "mustn't be snippy. Though I suppose you must be tired from carrying home all those books."

"Right," George agreed, "such weighty tomes as *How to Kill with Your Bare Hands*, *How to Maim with Your Feet*, and *Places to Stick Your Elbow that Are Hardly Polite*. Such gems of Muggle literature, yes?"

Harry folded his arms and leaned back in his chair. "I'll wager that I found at least one book that you two would consider to be of high literary value," he said in a snobby sort of voice.

"You're on," Fred replied avidly. "Now what are the terms?"

Harry smiled. "If I'm right, you two refrain from all pranks for a month after we get back to Hogwarts."

Fred went pale at the idea, but George eyed Harry warily. "That's quite a forfeit, you know. What if *you* lose the bet?"

Harry shrugged. "Name your price, Tweedle-dee." It was probably a good thing that none of the Weasleys had read Lewis Carroll for school.

Fred's eyes narrowed. "Too ickle for a Hogsmeade weekend as yet, but no reason they can't go over the summer, is there?"

George's grin was predatory. "Make talking Mum into it part of the forfeit."

"Too right," Fred agreed happily. "If you lose, you have to take Ginny to Hogsmeade for tea. I think Madam Puddifoot's, yes?"

"That would be entirely appropriate, oh brother of mine," George agreed.

Ginny seemed incapable of speech, but her eyes were blazing, her face was red, and her fingers seemed to be curling into claws.

"What's Madam Puddifoot's?" Harry asked warily, though he already knew the answer. *What are they playing at?* He wondered.

"Oh, it's just a tea shop," George replied innocently.

"It sounds a bit dodgy from what I've heard," Ron interjected, "all that frilly stuff."

"You're on," Harry said.

The look Ginny gave him seemed like it should have set his hair on fire. Then she stood up and angrily stalked off.

Harry sighed and stood up himself. He looked over at Fred and George and shook his head. "I hope you two plan on doing your own laundry while we're on holiday." He savoured the look of horror that came over them for a moment before he went upstairs.

Ginny's door was closed, but at least he couldn't hear any crying or breaking sounds. Still, he was hesitant when he knocked.

"Come in Harry," Ginny's voice was rather even for someone who'd supposedly fled to her room.

When he opened the door, she was sitting on her bed with her legs curled up under her, reading a book. "How did you know it was me? I felt like I was knocking on Dumbledore's door for a moment."

"I told you Harry," she replied, "you're the only one who bothers to knock."

Harry leaned against the doorframe. "You seem to have recovered rather quickly."

Ginny made a face. "When Fred and George are trying to get a rise out of you, sometimes it's less trouble to play along than see to what lengths they are willing to go to."

Harry smiled. "You're probably right. Not that I think there's much chance of me losing, but I don't consider buying you a cup of tea to be a horrible forfeit."

Ginny's eyes narrowed. "Of course, you'd also have to talk Mum into it."

"That's the beauty of it," he replied. "We just tell her about the wager. Maybe ask her to come with us. Fred and George never said we had to go by ourselves."

Ginny smirked. "They didn't, did they? Of course Mum will want to kill them anyway for trying to embarrass us."

Harry nodded. "More than likely; but as I said, I don't think the issue will come up."

"Too bad, I've heard some of the girls in the dormitory talk about that place. I'd like to see it some day," she said wistfully.

Harry shrugged. "We'll go then, when we're old enough to go on Hogsmeade weekends, if you still want to."

Ginny's eyebrows went up. "You heard what Ron said."

"Maybe I'm just morbidly curious," Harry said with a smirk. "I mean, how bad can it be?"

"I might hold you to that, you know," Ginny said archly.

Harry just shrugged again and went downstairs to wait for Mr. Weasley to get home.

If Harry had any doubts about the accuracy of Draco's words from the other timeline, they were dispelled when Arthur stepped out of the Floo. He wore an expression that Crookshanks would have been proud of, had the cat eaten an entire flock of canaries.

Harry couldn't help but grin back. "Good day at work?"

Arthur chuckled. "Let's just say Lucius Malfoy and his solicitor won't be seeing much of their families over Christmas holiday."

Mrs. Weasley looked worried. "Arthur, what did you do?"

"Just my job, Molly," he replied in a serious voice. "We got a tip about him concealing some contraband items, and it turned out to be true. He was more than willing to let us into his manor, after he saw the writ anyway, but when the Aurors started rolling up the carpet in his drawing-room he began to lose it. He tried to order us out like we were his house elves or something. Poor things looked quite beaten down too. One of them didn't look right in the head."

He shook his head abruptly. "Anyway, in a hidden room we struck pay dirt. Sure enough there were several Muggle items that had been enchanted in very nasty ways. We found a wrist-watcher that prematurely aged whoever wore it when it was wound up. A set of kitchen knives was poisoned *and* enchanted with a fumble-fingers jinx. Even if you were lucky enough to not cut yourself and die, the food prepared with them would still kill you, only slower."

"That- that's horrible!" Mrs. Weasley gasped. Harry realized that the idea of kitchen implements that would poison her children evidently hit a little too close to home for her.

"And that was just the tip of the iceberg, dear. Kingsley was back from Italy, and he brought along one of the archivists from the Department of Mysteries. There were some items in there that only he could identify, but what he saw seemed to shake him up a bit. One of them was an iron sceptre he claimed was the Hand of Magtherium, and that was said to have disappeared back in the forties."

Mrs. Weasley was still absentmindedly wiping her fingers with a dish towel. "What happened after that?"

"Lucius and Narcissa are still down at the Ministry answering a lot of questions. He's trying to act like he had no knowledge of the room's existence, but we could all see there wasn't enough dust or cobwebs for that to be true," Mr. Weasley said with a frown. "He may still wriggle out of this, but it will cost him a good piece of his influence. More importantly, he won't have access to those items any longer. From the look on the archivist's face, some of them were quite dangerous."

Harry couldn't suppress a smile. Lucius Malfoy's influence on the Ministry was a cancer on the body politic of the Wizarding world. He certainly had a role in Fudge's waffling for the first year after Voldemort's resurrection. Destroying the bastard's political capital wasn't nearly as satisfying as watching Ron behead his father's murderer, but it would have to do for now.

Even such an indirect success made it difficult for Harry to sit still during dinner. Mrs. Weasley still fussed over her husband, worried about the implications this might have in the future. Harry didn't blame her, as he knew that Lucius was deliberately targeting his enemy's family with the Diary. It was just too bad Malfoy's plans would run afoul of an enraged wizard willing to kill himself to travel back in time to stop him.

Still, indirect victories weren't always the most satisfying ones. After the brief confrontation at Lockhart's abortive Duelling Club, Harry found himself hungry for more. All this sneaking around and manoeuvring was wearing, in its own way. He'd always felt sorry about the way Sirius had been confined to Twelve Grimmauld Place, and now Harry found himself locked into a role he'd outgrown decades ago. He wanted to start rounding up the Horcruxes, at least the ones that weren't trapped like Helga's Cup.

But there was no way a twelve year old boy could disappear for days at a time – especially if his name was Harry Potter. He also didn't think he could safely Apparate yet. The Ministry maintained that wizards and witches younger than the allowed age couldn't do so

safely. Harry ordinarily took anything the Ministry said with a large grain of salt, but the few times he'd had to do a *lot* of Apparating in a short period of time, his whole body ached abominably afterward.

One of the Dark Lord's followers spotted Harry six months before the end of the war, paying his respects on the anniversary of the Hogwarts Massacre. Unfortunately for them, Voldemort was engaged in moving his base of operations yet again. The Death Eaters, which now included many who attended Hogwarts with Harry, decided to act quickly to remove their master's last remaining enemy. That was their mistake.

Harry was moving as soon as he'd heard the first distinctive pops from people Apparating onto the grounds. Harry spent the best years of his life there, and he knew it like the back of his hand. He'd even spent enough time in the ruins, looking for survivors and later for bodies, that the irregular rock pile had become dreadfully familiar.

It also didn't help that he'd spent the day thinking about all the people he'd lost, and trying to find a reason not to turn his wand on himself. Hate seemed as good a reason as any when he saw the Death Eater masks.

He'd killed nearly thirty of Voldemort's remaining followers in a two hour running battle through the ruins of Hogwarts and the burning wreckage of Hogsmeade. Harry surprised himself with his inventiveness in finding ways to make Death Eaters die. He'd shattered skulls with *Reducto*, beheaded others with cutting curses, crushed them with banished stones, and sent a bolt of lightning into a pool of water, electrocuting three at once. He turned a section of stone floor into water and cancelled the spell after two Death Eaters sank out of sight, entombing them forever. A massive transfiguration turned a stone overhang into an incredibly strong acid, giving a trio of Death Eaters time for a few gurgling screams, but never a chance to see their killer.

He'd even roundhouse kicked one in the throat, collapsing the trachea and suffocating the bastard.

But through the course of the battle, Harry lost count of the number of times he'd Disapparated. He never stayed in place after a kill,

knowing he couldn't afford a single mistake. Besides, he usually made little or no sound when Apparating and the screaming usually was enough to cover it. His invisibility cloak had been lost years ago, but frequently reapplied Disillusionment charms served almost as well that day.

Only once had he popped back into existence near an enemy, and that was the last one. The kick was more reflexive than anything else, but it did its job. It also knocked the Death Eater's mask away, and Harry watched dispassionately as Theodore Nott choked to death on his own blood and cartilage.

It was then that the pain hit.

Harry fell to his knees as the adrenalin wore off and his bones felt like they'd all been removed, ground to powder, and shoved back into his protesting flesh. He'd been nearly a week in Dumbledore's sanctum recovering before he could move without pain. As far as object lessons went, it was fairly effective.

And so Harry found himself clearing the table with Ginny, rather than clearing away the pieces of Voldemort's soul. He did, however, take consolation in the fact that the timelines hadn't diverged before a little more than a year ago. That meant that the Horcruxes were still hidden in the same places that he remembered from his conversations with Dumbledore. And as long as Voldemort had no idea anyone knew the secret to his immortality, he'd have no reason to move them from their hiding places.

Not that it made the waiting any easier.

After dinner they practiced their Occlumency again. Harry suspected that everyone was working on their own as well, since he was starting to notice sharp increases in their resistance. He supposed Snape was a strong motivator – not that he'd be thanking the man any time soon. Harry could still get inside and read their surface thoughts, which was as far as he'd go. But he found it took a little longer each time.

Harry was of two minds regarding this progress. He was looking forward to being able to tell his friends everything. But at the same



time, he was afraid of how they would react. In the end it came down to one thing. They would be safer, both by knowing what was going on, and if no one could use Legilimency to read them. So he continued to push them to improve. By the time they finished, everyone was tired and ready for bed. Mr. Weasley, however, entered the living room and asked Harry if he could talk to him for a moment.

Harry was half expecting this, ever since he told Mr. Weasley about the Malfoy's hidden room. Nonetheless, he was still a little nervous as he sat down at Molly's scrubbed wood table with a cup of hot tea steaming in front of him.

"It's got chamomile and a touch of rosehips," Mrs. Weasley explained as she and her husband sat down with a cup as well. "It might help you sleep a little better."

Harry's eyes snapped up at that, but Molly's gaze didn't waver. "I remembered you and Ron talking about how little sleep you seem to get," she said. "I know for a fact you are usually awake before everyone else."

Harry nodded slowly, but didn't volunteer anything. Ron did sort of blurt things out when he was angry, but Harry couldn't blame him. He'd participated in that argument of his own free will.

"Your information on Malfoy Manor was spot on, Harry," Mr. Weasley said, getting straight to the point. "I'm reporting it as an anonymous tip, but is there anything you'd like to tell us about how you knew?"

Harry shook his head. "Not much to it," he said simply. "Draco's got a big mouth and he's not very discreet. He likes to brag a lot and I overheard him talking about it." It was all quite true; he just hadn't specified how long ago he'd heard it.

Mr. and Mrs. Weasley exchanged glances. "Harry," Mrs. Weasley said, leaning forward and laying her hand on his forearm. Her fingers were surprisingly warm. "Arthur and I have both noticed that something is bothering you. We wanted to give you time to bring it up at your own pace, but we're not sure that's for the best now. You've given Arthur information on some very dangerous people. There's

that whole business with your Godfather. Not to mention stopping You-Know-Who last spring. We don't want to force you to do something you don't want to do, but we also have our other children to look out for."

Harry sat there like he'd been brained with a club. He knew her concern was entirely unfeigned, but her last words still flooded him with conflicting emotions. The implication that she considered him one of her children wasn't lost on him, and he nearly lost it right then and there.

Arthur, bless his soul, immediately picked up on Harry's turmoil. "Tell us as much as you can for now, all right Harry?"

The man's willingness to give him the benefit of the doubt shamed Harry even more. He let out a sigh. "I'll be right back," he said and went up to the room he shared with Ron. He picked up his copy of *Occlumency: the Hidden Arte* and made his way back to the kitchen. After he sat down, he wordlessly slid the book across the table to Mr. Weasley.

"This is for your school project?" Mr Weasley asked, but then his eyes narrowed.

"Well, it's a project for school... more like it's based upon something going on at school," Harry said with a sigh. "Some rather odd things occurred last spring, and Hermione figured out what was behind it. Legilimency is a form of magic that lets you enter another person's mind and read their thoughts and memories."

Now it was Mr. Weasley's turn to look upset. "And someone at Hogwarts was using this on you?"

Harry shook his head. "I'm apparently somewhat hard to read, but that didn't stop him from going after everyone else."

Arthur gave Harry a very piercing stare. "Harry, does this mean you are involved in things you have to keep secret?"

Harry wracked his brain to find a way to reassure his guardians, without giving anything away. When it suddenly came to him, he was

almost embarrassed at how simple it was. He pulled out his wand, making sure it wasn't pointed at anyone, and began to speak. "I, Harry Potter, swear upon my magic, that to the best of my knowledge, I am not involved in anything that is contrary to the interests of any of the current members of the Weasley family."

Harry was prepared for the faint surge of magic that signalled the closure of a magically binding oath. But instead of a faint glow, the visual signature lit up the entire kitchen, dazzling Harry's eyes as it reflected off of Mrs. Weasley's polished tea pot.

When his eyes cleared, Mrs. Weasley was still blinking, though her expression was embarrassed. "Harry, that wasn't really necessary dear."

Harry shook his head doggedly. "I am involved in something, but I can't tell you what it is. Not yet." He pushed the book toward them.

Mr. Weasley, on the other hand, looked even more troubled. "You need us to learn this so we can keep your secret. Harry? Is it really that bad?"

Harry nodded. "It's not that I don't trust you, but Severus Snape is another matter entirely. Not when he can use that information against me."

Molly's eyes grew flinty. "That man is using this, this Legilimency, on *my children!*" she exclaimed. Harry remembered his first visit to The Burrow, and how Molly reminded him of a sabre-toothed tiger. "Albus Dumbledore is going to hear about this." She stood up from the table, nearly knocking her chair over as she marched to the fireplace.

Harry, however, stopped her with just two words. "He knows."

Mrs. Weasley spun around, clearly shocked. "He knows about this? And he allows it to go on? Harry, why...?"

Harry sighed. "I think Snape uses it on the members of his house. Many of their parents are involved in the Dark Arts, and he reports anything important he learns to Dumbledore."

“How do you know this?” Mr. Weasley asked.

Harry shrugged. “I overheard part of it, but I also confronted Dumbledore about it last Christmas. He said they would do ‘whatever it took’ to guarantee the safety of their students,” he said, making a sour face. “So I should just give up and let him do whatever he wanted to me. I, on the other hand, don’t trust Snape to be impartial with anyone named ‘Potter’.”

Mrs. Weasley looked sick and angry at the same time. Mr. Weasley, however, looked more resigned. “Albus always did what he thought was right,” he said.

“No matter how many people disagreed with him?” Harry asked.

Mr. Weasley nodded. He carefully picked up the book, almost like he was handling a dangerous artefact.

Harry quietly cleared his throat. “I, er, can feel it when Snape tries to pry into my mind. I’ve also felt something like it a couple of times when I was alone with the Headmaster. He hasn’t tried it recently,” Harry added quickly, “but I think I bought myself a little credibility with the Stone. But he will likely know when you start practicing this.”

Arthur Weasley frowned. “We always supported Dumbledore because of what he did, rather than who he was. He was one of the few wizards who could match Voldemort’s power, but he also lead and organized those willing to fight against the darkness,” he said with a defeated sigh. “But I haven’t been able to agree with his latest actions, particularly where you are concerned, Harry.”

Harry felt a peculiar mix of awe and remorse at the man’s words. “I don’t like putting you in this position,” he whispered.

Mrs. Weasley reached out and grasped his hand. “Harry, you don’t have to make us do the right thing.”

“I know,” Harry replied. “I just wish this wasn’t so complicated.”

“Well,” Arthur said, “We will accept your oath for now, until it’s... safe, I suppose... for you to tell us more.”

“Thank you,” Harry said. He was surprised they were willing to settle for so little.

“I don’t think you are doing this just for yourself, Harry,” Mr. Weasley said in a sober voice. “But you can tell us about that once it’s safe for you to do so.”

Even a partial confession must have been good for Harry’s soul, because he slept like a rock that night, and actually had to have Ron wake him up well after the sun had risen.

“Come on. Mate,” his friend said with a grin. “Mum always works herself into a frenzy getting ready for Christmas dinner. Better to be well out from under foot.”

Harry sat up, scrubbing at his eyes. He couldn’t believe he didn’t have any nightmares, at least none that woke him up. By the time he’d showered and dressed, The Burrow was engulfed in a vortex of holiday cheer.

The Wizarding Wireless was playing a medley of Celestine Warbeck Christmas tunes, Fred and George were outside stalking Percy and Ron with an armload of snowballs, Mr. Weasley was tinkering with a set of Muggle Christmas lights, and Ginny had been drafted by Mrs. Weasley to help stuff an enormous goose.

Ron’s caution was well-earned, but didn’t prevent him and Percy from being drafted to pick up a few last minute items for tomorrow’s dinner. Mrs. Weasley sent them off to the village with instructions to hurry before the shops closed early for Christmas Eve.

Harry was helping Ginny open the chestnuts when Mrs. Weasley began digging through her cupboards. “Merlin, I can’t believe we’re out of marjoram,” she sighed. “Ginny, can you still see Percy or Ron on the path?”

“They’ve been gone nearly a quarter of an hour, Mum,” Ginny replied, and then straightened in her chair. “I can catch up to them though. How much do you need?”

“Just a spoonful dear, but I need you to finish quartering those chestnuts or we’ll never get done.” Mrs. Weasley looked around and saw Harry. “Harry dear, could you run after the boys and tell Percy I need some marjoram for the stuffing?”

Harry nodded, grateful for something to do. He carefully ignored the rebellious scowl Ginny shot at her mother. He knew she didn’t like being singled out to help with the cooking, but he also knew Mrs. Weasley would rather not send her into the village by herself.

He ran up the stairs and dug an old jacket out of his trunk, and then slid his wand into the sleeve. *I ought to rig up some kind of holster that I can strap to my arm, he thought, one of these days it’s going to slide right out of there, and probably at the worst possible time.*

The sky was growing overcast and the wind was bitter as he walked down the two-track lane that led to the road. Harry hunched his shoulders a bit, but kept his eyes open for Ron and Percy. He tried to hurry along when he reached the road, but he didn’t catch up to them before he passed over the River Otter and entered the village proper. As cold as it was, they probably were in a rush to get out of the wind.

He looked around as he made his way between a few last-minute shoppers, but there was no distinctive red hair in sight.

In a village as small as this, the grocer wasn’t hard to find. That was fortunate, because by the sign and Harry’s watch, there was less than ten minutes before closing. He gratefully slipped inside the warm building, but was disappointed that he still couldn’t find Ron or Percy. He knew Mrs. Weasley had anticipated him catching up her third eldest son, and she probably wouldn’t be too thrilled to know Harry was roaming the village by himself, but it couldn’t be helped.

After a look around, he found the spices and picked up a jar of marjoram. He had no idea what it tasted like, but it was evidently essential for Mrs. Weasley’s chestnut stuffing. He paid for the jar, glad that he still had some pounds left over in his jacket from his forays on to Charing Cross road.

When he stepped back into the chill morning, the darkening clouds made it feel more like twilight. The cold wind cutting into the back of

his neck made Harry wonder if it would snow soon. He was a little worried about his failure to find Ron and Percy. He turned to go back inside and ask if two red-headed boys had just been in, but the shopkeeper had just locked the door and pulled the shade over the glass. Harry cursed himself for not thinking to ask earlier, but he didn't want to start pounding on the glass and make a nuisance of himself.

His mind wandered as he walked back toward the road. Harry wondered about the 'strange faces' seen around the village, and if they were still there. Of course, the Weasleys went into the village all the time, and no one had bothered them yet. But still it made him uneasy.

Harry hunched down into his slightly too large jacket and began wishing he'd borrowed a hat. He was about to turn onto the road, when he heard a commotion behind him. He turned and saw three men running across the street. They were dressed fairly nondescript, in dark coats, two of them with hats and one with a scarf. They could have been policemen, tradesmen chasing a shoplifter, or irate pet owners.

But the sight of all three of them chasing a very large black dog definitely caught Harry's attention.

They were already across the street when Harry spun around. He trailed behind them, anxious to keep up, but wary of slipping on the icy cobblestones. This hesitancy wasn't so bad, because he also didn't want them to notice him following them.

Fortunately, Harry didn't have to go very far. They turned sharply and cut into a narrow alleyway between two brick buildings. Harry felt his heart constrict when he saw one pause at the mouth of the alleyway to reach into his coat and pull out a wand.

Despite the fear and adrenalin that made his hands quiver, Harry forced himself to slow down and listen before he reached the alleyway. Over the wind, he could still make out voices.

"Can you see him?"

"No, I think he's behind those garbage cans."

"Ruddy mess back here."

"You know it. Now move up on the left and see if you can spot him."

"I'm not too keen on getting that close. Did you see the size of those teeth?"

"One stunner and they won't matter."

Harry pulled out his wand and held it close by his side.

"This better be the real thing. We go to all this trouble to capture a stray and I'll have your arse."

"I know what I saw! The bastard was standing there plain as day, messing with that latch. Soon as he closed the door, he turned into that bloody dog."

"Makes sense, you know, what with Pettigrew."

"Shut it you two. Your yapping will get you killed some day. Now... we do this by the numbers, and then we can haul him off to somewhere a lot warmer than this... for us anyway. Avery, you cover the right. Dawlish, you take the left and circle around. Got it?"

"Who died and put you in charge, Macnair?"

"You're about to, if you don't shut up. Now, on the count of three--"

Harry, who'd been waiting for them to get focused on their target, stepped around the corner into the alleyway with his wand up.

"*Stupefy!*" His first stunning spell caught the rearmost man squarely in the back. It threw him forward off his feet and he skidded several yards in the mucky debris in the alley.

"*Stupefy!*" The second stunner caught the man on the right as he was beginning to turn. He bounced off the brick wall behind him and crumpled to the ground.



By this time the man on the left had turned and brought up his wand. Harry dived to his right as he heard the man bark "*Percutio!*" Something tugged at the left sleeve of his jacket as Harry tucked his head and executed a perfect shoulder roll. He rotated smoothly and ended in a kneeling position with his wand extended at his opponent. Dawlish was just bringing his wand to bear when Harry's stunning spell sent him crashing to the ground.

Harry rose shakily to his feet and looked around. Their impromptu duel didn't appear to have drawn any attention. He carefully felt his left arm. There was a small hole bored through the fabric just above his elbow, but it appeared to have missed the flesh completely. Harry let out a shaky breath. He thought he might have been wounded and not felt it yet.

Of course, there were other kinds of damage to deal with. He walked further into the alleyway. A large black dog stuck his head out from around a garbage can and stared at him in a distinctly non-doglike fashion.

Harry kneeled next to the man he recognized as Walden Macnair after flipping him onto his back. He had a strong temptation to simply kill the Death Eater on the spot, but that might be hard to justify. Not to mention the extra attention that the murder of a Ministry employee would draw to Ottery Saint Catchpole.

"*Obliviate!*" A grey beam of light sprang from the end of Harry's wand, connecting with the man's forehead. He put a little more effort into the spell than a basic amnesia effect would require. If Harry's calculations were correct, he'd just wiped away most of his memories from today. Then he smiled as an idea occurred to him.

"*Vinomenti!*" A jet of dark purple wine spewed from the end of Harry's wand, soaking into the man's clothes and rendering him quite aromatic. He let a little dribble into the man's mouth, but feared that more would make him choke. Being found soaked with wine would supply a probable cause for his missing memory – not to mention destroying the credibility of anything he might recall.

When he looked up, the dog had edged out from around the garbage can and was peering at him. Harry remembered reading once that a

dog's vision was nowhere near as acute as its sense of smell, so he straightened up, smiling. "Don't go anywhere, Padfoot. I still have to fix up the other two."

Harry had never thought that the term 'gobsmacked' could be applied to a dog. He was just proven wrong as the large black dog froze in place, except for its mouth, which dropped open. He knew from Remus' stories that Sirius had often used his Animagus form to play with baby Harry, so he could always pass it off as a childhood recollection. But he wouldn't have traded the shocked look his godfather gave him for anything in the world.

Harry Potter's Christmas had come a day early this year.

A/N:

Well, this took a bit longer to finish, but I hope all the Sirius fans will be happy now. Cyber-stalking is really un-cool you know. )

An announcement: As part of this story being archived, Kokopelli has begun beta-ing these chapters as well. (Runsamok is still doing pre-beta, as she is often perched on my shoulder as I write anyway.)

A second announcement: You may have noticed that the pace of updates from me has slowed. I've taken on a temporary position with my previous employer. 40 hours a week plus 10-15 commuting takes a big chunk out of my writing time. I'd much rather write full time, but I got to eat and pay a mortgage.

Plot discussions and individual Q&A will be addressed on my yahoo group ([viridiandreams](#), see my author profile for the link) A lot of interesting discussions are taking place there as well.

Thanks for reading!

-Matthew

## Chapter 24

Working as rapidly as possible, Harry Obliviated and marinated Sirius' other pursuers. The Animagus made his own contributions as well. Harry supposed making it look like Macnair lost control of his bladder added to the effect, but he thought Sirius enjoyed whizzing on the Death Eater a little too much.

When they were done, Harry quickly weighed his options. "Padfoot," he said quietly, "I know you have a lot of questions. If you will follow me for right now, I'll answer as many as I can when it's safe."

The large dog gazed at Harry for a moment, then nodded its head in a distinctly un-doglike manner.

Harry gave a quick glance left and right at the mouth of the alleyway. Seeing no one, he slid his wand back into his jacket.

"Come on boy," Harry said in a jaunty voice as he stepped out onto the sidewalk, "I bet I can find you some dinner back home."

Sirius made an encouraging sound somewhat close to a whine as they set out.

Harry wondered briefly how long it would take before the men he stunned were found. If it were long enough, they could possibly die from exposure. That wouldn't be a tragedy as far as Harry was concerned – the only reason they were still alive was his desire to avoid stronger scrutiny. Of course, if their deaths looked to be completely accidental, then so be it.

The light was fading and the wind was picking up as they crossed the bridge over the River Otter. Harry looked left and right for any sign of Ron or Percy, but still found no sign of them.

Starting to worry even more, Harry set out for The Burrow at a brisk walk. Sirius paced him easily, warm inside his shaggy coat. Harry supposed the Grim look-alike would give anyone trying to accost them pause, so he picked up his pace to a slow jog.

By the time he reached the two-track lane that led to the Weasley residence, it was nearly dark. Harry knew Mrs. Weasley was probably getting frantic at this point, but his next actions required a certain degree of precision.

As they neared the outer edge of the wards, Harry called out for Sirius to wait. The large black dog paused, then cocked its head when Harry pulled out his wand again. Muttering the pass phrase under his breath, Harry tapped the end of his wand on the top of Sirius' head. Harry's wand vibrated as his Godfather was outlined in a flickering glow that disappeared just as suddenly.

"That's so you can get through the wards without getting cooked," Harry muttered.

Sirius shook his head like he had an itch in his ears, but stared as Harry nodded.

The moment they stepped onto the property, Harry made a beeline for Arthur's shed. He opened the door and led Sirius inside, careful not to know over any of his Guardian's projects.

"Will this be warm enough for now?" Harry asked the dog.

Sirius nodded in a distinctly human-like fashion.

"Good, I'm going to bring Arthur Weasley out here as soon as I get a chance to talk to him alone. He's been prodding people at the Ministry about what really happened to you, and I think we can trust him. I'll be back out here in a while."

With that, Harry stepped back out into the chill evening air and headed for the garden and the house beyond it. He took deep breaths as he walked, trying to calm his trip hammer pulse. Sirius had been found, and he was safe, at least for right now.

Harry knew he had to tell the elder Weasleys. There was no way really to hide Sirius on the property without their help. It was the reactions of the younger Weasleys he worried about. Percy, with his attitude toward the Ministry or any other authority figure, was worrisome.

For that matter, the younger Weasleys were still subject to having their memories read by Snape. Given the Potions Master's antipathy toward the Marauders, Harry had little doubt that he'd inform the Ministry at once of his discovery.

No sooner had Harry begun knocking on the door than it was snatched open.

Mrs. Weasley hauled him inside and shut the door all seemingly in one motion. "Harry!" she breathed. "Are you all right? We were starting to worry when Ron and Percy came back without you."

Harry found himself engulfed in a Mrs. Weasley-sized hug. His arms partially trapped, Harry patted her awkwardly. "So they made it back already?"

Mrs. Weasley let him go, seemingly with some reluctance, and nodded. "Ron wanted to go back out and look for you, but it seemed smarter to give you a bit of time first, especially since the clock said you were all right."

Harry turned toward the clock as she drew him into the kitchen. It was then that he noticed a hand had been added for him as well, and it was now pointing at 'home'.

"You do need to be more careful when you cross the street though, Harry dear," Mrs. Weasley continued. "Your hand changed to mortal peril for an instant."

Harry nodded slowly. *That must have been when Dawlish almost hit me.* "How did I miss Ron and Percy?" he asked.

"We took a short-cut on the way back," Ron said as he walked into the kitchen, a disgusted look on his face. "If it hadn't been so cold, we wouldn't have—"

"No harm done, Ron," Harry said with a smile. It honestly would have been a lot harder to deal with Sirius, not to mention the Ministry flunkies, if he'd been with Ron and Percy at the time.

Ron frowned, but decided to let it drop, for which Harry was grateful. Harry hung his jacket up in the hallway and let Mrs. Weasley drag back to the table for some hot chocolate. Before sitting down, he handed her the jar of Marjoram with a flourish.

She frowned at the spice container for a moment, and Harry guessed she'd forgotten why she'd sent him to the village. He was touched that she'd been worried enough to forget about her cooking.

Ginny was sitting at the table as well, dicing up vegetables with a small knife. Harry didn't miss the small sigh she let out when he entered the kitchen, so he gave her an especially bright smile. His younger half had never had anyone worry about him, and his older self had missed it as well. Sometimes it was all he could do to keep from collapsing into a blubbering heap. Reminding himself that Tom was still out there was usually more than enough, because that thought always filled him with a cold fury. He was damned if he'd let that bastard hurt them again.

Ginny abruptly looked down, focussing all her attention on her task as Harry took a deep breath. Maybe he wasn't the only person struggling for some emotional equilibrium, and he wondered if that meant what he thought it might. His mind snapped back to the present as Mrs. Weasley placed a steaming mug in front of him.

"Drink that up, Harry," she said, visibly fretting, "I would never have sent you, if I'd know it was going to get dark so quickly."

Harry swallowed, letting the hot chocolate spread a column of warmth down his throat and into his stomach. "It was all right, I just jogged on the way home and stayed warm enough. I missed my workout this morning anyway."

Mrs. Weasley began blinking rapidly, and Harry wondered what was wrong. Then he realized he'd used the word 'home' to describe The Burrow. A little embarrassed, he finished his hot chocolate, set the cup in the sink and grabbed another knife and sat down beside Ginny.

The youngest Weasley was more than happy to split the vegetable preparation with him. As they set to work, she whispered, "Don't mind Mum, she's always like this around Christmas."

Harry nodded and let his hands work while his mind wandered. He could hear Mr. Weasley and Ron talking in the sitting room. His Guardian still hadn't given up on that string of Muggle Christmas lights, but seemed content to while away the day working on them. Harry supposed he'd have a better chance to talk to him alone after dinner.

He decided to approach Mr. Weasley first for a couple of reasons. Molly was still a little turbulent, and Harry wasn't sure how she'd react if she discovered he'd gotten into a fire fight with three adult wizards – no matter how easily he'd won. The other factor was his memories of the future at Twelve Grimmauld Place. Sirius seemed to get along a little better with Arthur than with his wife. Harry knew that he was one of the main bones of contention, and he wanted to play this as cautiously as possible.

So Harry sat there, chopping vegetables with Ginny until they were done. Molly shooed them out of the kitchen while she put the finishing touches on tomorrow's dinner. Harry had come to realize how much she simply enjoyed cooking, so he let himself relax as Ginny led him out of the kitchen.

Ron had evidently talked Percy into a game of wizarding chess, something his older brother looked to be regretting. Of course that regret might have also origins in the fact that Fred and George were watching with great interest, and making commentary like Quidditch announcers. Or at least Quidditch announcers like their friend Lee Jordan – unashamedly biased and funny as hell.

Percy was definitely the most studious of the Weasley brothers, with the possible exception of Bill the Curse-Breaker. He was definitely the most academically inclined of those still living at home. As such, he was not used to losing in a primarily cerebral match-up with his youngest brother. That, combined with some smart remarks from the twins, had his ears turning an angry pink.

Ron, bent over his pieces, was oblivious to his brother's growing frustration, but Harry noticed Ginny frowning and chewing at her lip. She evidently didn't want a blow-up on Christmas Eve any more than Harry did.

Ron finally announced check-mate in that detached voice he used when Harry knew he was well into the game.

George whispered "...and the crowd goes wild!" while Fred made faint cheering noises and tried not to crack up. Percy stood up abruptly, his face starting to flush.

Harry spoke up. "I think Percy set the record, didn't he Ron?"

Ron straightened up, blinking and stretching. "How's that?"

"You two must have been going at it at least forty minutes, right?" Harry clarified. "That's the longest anyone in Gryffindor has lasted so far this year, isn't it?"

Ron nodded slowly. "Hermione went thirty five minutes once, but she always took a while to make her moves."

Harry bit back the first reply that came to mind. Instead he turned to Percy. "Congrats Percy, you're just the latest in a long line of victims, but you made a better showing than I did."

Percy blinked, but finally managed to master his emotions. "I did?"

Harry nodded. "Ron beats *everyone* at chess. It's become almost silly. I'm just waiting for him to challenge Professor McGonagall or Dumbledore."

Percy nodded slowly, and began to smile. But then he stiffened and gave Harry a piercing look.

Whatever the prefect wanted to say was interrupted by Mrs. Weasley announcing that dinner was ready.

As Ron had explained to Harry earlier, dinner on Christmas Eve at The Burrow was usually light fare – sandwiches and a hearty soup. This allowed Mrs. Weasley time to go all out for her Christmas Day feast.



When know one was looking, Harry slipped a dry sandwich into his pocket for later. He ignored the pointed look Crookshanks was giving him.

As he and Ginny cleared the table, Ron and the others began heading upstairs, obviously planning to make an early night of it. Harry smiled to himself. The sooner they went to sleep, the sooner Christmas morning would come.

Ginny seemed tired as well, but she was also looking at Harry a little oddly as well.

"You must be tired," Harry suggested, "you were working half the day." He yawned. "I'm going to sleep after I ask your dad something."

Ginny frowned a little, but just nodded and went upstairs.

Molly was in the kitchen and Arthur was in the living room, regretfully rolling up the string of lights that never actually lit up, no matter what he tried.

"Are you taking those back out to the shed?" Harry asked.

Arthur nodded, obviously still pondering the mysteries of Muggle technology.

"I'll go with you," Harry suggested. "There's something I need to ask you about."

Mr. Weasley looked up then, no longer distracted. They both collected jackets from the front hall and walked out into the shadowed garden.

"I had a bit of trouble in the village," Harry said as they approached the shed.

Arthur gave him a quick look, but said nothing.

"I'm all right," Harry quickly assured him. "In fact, I'm better than all right. I found Sirius."

Arthur Weasley stopped dead in his tracks and stared at Harry as the boy pulled the door open. A large black dog, curled up comfortably in the corner raised its head sleepily.

Mr. Weasley glanced from Harry to the dog, and back again. At first he gazed at Harry with some concern in his eyes, but then they widened. "He's an Animagus as well?" he asked.

Harry nodded, and then turned toward his Godfather. "You can show him. I trust him, and you should as well." He pulled the sandwich from his pocket. "Besides, I think you'd rather eat this with hands anyway."

Sirius' outline blurred and suddenly a very thin man in ragged clothing was crouched on the floor of the shed. His hand shook as he took the sandwich from Harry.

Harry felt his eyes prickling. If anything Sirius looked worse than the first time he'd seen him. Before he stopped to think, his wand was in his hand and a simple charm filled the shed with warm air. Another wave and a mug of steaming hot chocolate appeared in front of his Godfather.

Arthur's eyes widened as he watched Harry casually violate the laws on underaged magic use. Not to mention the fact that his ward had just performed a dual conjuration on the spot.

"Don't worry," Harry said quietly. "The Ministry sensors can't pick up a thing through those wards. I should have done this earlier."

"It's all right," Sirius said, his voice rusty. "I was more tired than anything, and this shed is plenty warm enough when you have fur." He took another sip of the hot chocolate and grimaced a little. "I think this is all I'd better eat for a while, anyway."

Arthur nodded slowly, obviously troubled by the implications of Sirius' appearance.

"I saw some men chasing him in the village," Harry explained. "When I saw one pull out a wand, I knew they were up to no good. When I saw what they were chasing, the memory came back of a big black dog that looked after me when I was a baby and I put it all together."

"But how did you get away from the Aurors?" Arthur asked worriedly.

"Only one of them was an Auror I recognized," Sirius corrected. "And I didn't do anything. Young Harry here came up behind them and stunned all three."

Arthur stared at Harry, who was suddenly seized by a desire to sink into the floor. "How long before they come here looking for you?" he said turning back toward Sirius.

"Quite a while," Sirius said affably. "Harry Obliviated them and left them soaked with alcohol in an alleyway. Even if they did eventually remember what happened, no one would believe it. James couldn't have done better himself."

The compliment caught Harry off guard and he coughed as his throat suddenly constricted.

"I see," Arthur Weasley said. "Well, I am glad to you seem to be all in one piece. We were getting a little worried when you disappeared."

"You were not the only one," Sirius agreed. "A few days after your visit I was moved into another cell block. I wasn't concerned at first, but then I realized that they weren't feeding me anymore. When it became clear this was deliberate, I decided to risk getting caught by the Dementors and snuck out as a dog." He shivered. "The sea is damn cold this time of year. I almost didn't make it."

Arthur looked furious. "Did you recognize any of the men who moved you to your new cell?" he asked.

Sirius shook his head. "They were all new to me," he sighed.

"Maybe you will get an opportunity to identify them later," Arthur said in an encouraging tone of voice, "But I'm not sure I understand why Harry didn't bring you into the house already."

Harry let out a frustrated sigh. "Remember that book I showed you?"

Arthur nodded as his face turned grim.

“One of the few people Snape hates as much as me or my father is Sirius Black,” Harry said flatly. “If he picked up from Ron or Ginny that he was staying here, well, there would be Aurors here in minutes. You and Mrs. Weasley can avoid him until you’ve mastered what’s in that book.”

Arthur nodded. “That seems possible. But what about Dumbledore, you said he can do it was well.”

Sirius appeared to following this conversation easily enough that Harry began to hope. “Professor Dumbledore knows that Sirius is innocent. Moreover, he knows that I know. If he gave Sirius up to the Ministry, he knows I’d likely leave Hogwarts forever and maybe even let him deal with Voldemort on his own.”

Both adults went silent at this.

“I don’t think it will come to that,” Harry reassured them. “He’s even cut back on the legilimency since he knows I can sense it. And I doubt it’ll be that easy to duck out of a prophecy.”

“You know about that?” Sirius asked quickly.

Harry nodded. “He finally told us last term.”

“Prophecy?” Arthur asked.

Harry sighed. “There was a prophecy made, right before I was born. It’s going to come down to me or Voldemort, *‘for neither can live while the other survives’*.”

Arthur looked ill. “So there really isn’t any way out, is there? No way to avoid fighting him again.”

Harry shook his head. “I appear to be the only one who can stop him, at least permanently. Otherwise he will come back and start killing again.”

“And he told you this?” Arthur asked incredulously. “How could he do such a thing to a twelve year old boy?”

Harry grunted. "Maybe because I asked him to. Voldemort mentioned a prophecy in passing when I met him before, and I wanted Dumbledore to tell me. If it's my destiny, then I have a right to know. If it's up to me to take him out, then better I know as soon as possible so I can start preparing. I already knew I was a target, now I just know why."

Arthur nodded, but his face was a little grey. "Doesn't... doesn't it bother you, to know what you have to do?" he finally asked in a sick voice.

Harry considered his response, noticing that Sirius was also watching him closely, his sandwich eaten and his hot chocolate drunk. "Mr. Weasley, do you remember when you and Mrs. Weasley heard about Fabian and Gideon?"

Arthur swallowed and nodded.

"Mrs. Weasley hasn't been quite the same after that, has she?" Harry asked softly. "I saw her looking at her ornament," he explained in little more than a whisper.

Mr. Weasley seemed to have found his voice again, for this time he answered aloud. "No, Harry, she hasn't."

"Voldemort has killed so many people, and blighted the lives of so many more..." Harry's voice trailed off as he groped for the words. "It's almost, a privilege, to know that I'm the one who gets to stop him. My parents, Ron's uncles, Sirius' brother." Harry noticed his last addition garnered a sharp look from Sirius. "I've done a lot of reading about that bastard's reign of terror. He has a lot to answer for."

Mr. Weasley nodded slowly, his jaw tightening as his colour returned. Harry supposed he had just dropped a lot of nasty shocks on him. A less charitable person could interpret his reticence as manipulation, so Harry threw a bone to his conscience. "I'll understand, you know, if learning this makes you feel differently about our living arrangements," he said quietly. "You didn't sign up for all of this, and you have your own family to look out for."

Arthur Weasley frowned, and Harry thought he detected a flash of anger in his eyes. "Harry, I will decide what I need to look out for. When Molly and I signed those papers, you became a member of this family. Are you saying that you *want* to leave?"

Harry shook his head quickly.

"Good. Then let us never speak of that again. For that matter, I agree that the Dark Lord has a lot to answer for, and it could also be a privilege to help the one who is supposed to bring him to justice." Arthur's anger faded as he spoke, and Harry felt a little ashamed. He'd been feeling so guilty and so concerned about making sure of his welcome that he'd inadvertently insulted the man.

"Now," Arthur continued, "I think our guest could do with a meal and a hot bath. I think I've got some clothes—"

"Er," Harry spoke up. "Remember, we can't let anyone in the house know he's here. Percy is very sharp, and he hasn't had any Occlumency training at all." He didn't miss Sirius' eyes dart towards him when he mentioned Occlumency, and he began to entertain a small, frail hope.

"Right." Arthur nodded, frowning. "I suppose we could rig up something out here then. It doesn't seem very hospitable though... Molly would clout me if she knew I let you stay out here in the cold."

Sirius chuckled again. "It seems to be quite warm in here right now," he said, nodding toward Harry. "Honestly, this is better accommodations than I'm used to, if you know what I mean."

Harry looked around the shed. "I'm sure we could rig up a tub or something if you wanted to get cleaned up... and there's plenty of food in the house."

Arthur clapped his hands together. "Let's see to that and I'll have a quick word with Molly. I will, however, need to tell her more when it's prudent to do so."

In short order, Sirius was looking remarkably better. His filthy prison clothes had been burned while he was soaking in a magically-

expanded washtub. Using a wand he'd 'acquired' after his escape, Harry's Godfather managed to trim his matted hair and beard. Now, sitting on a transfigured cot, dressed in some of Arthur's old clothes that fit his wasted frame, he looked decades younger.

Arthur was a little concerned when Sirius politely declined more than another small sandwich, but Harry's eyes narrowed. "They were starving you, weren't they?"

Sirius nodded. "Long enough that it hurts if I eat too much."

Arthur's face purpled and Harry briefly felt sorry for the people responsible for his Godfather's condition if his Guardian ever got hold of them. Harry distracted himself from the darkening course of his thoughts by taking out his wand and reinforcing the warming charms on the shed.

"Harry," Arthur asked after a moment. "I know the Ministry can't tell you are using magic, but why did you insist on doing all the conjuring and Spellwork in here."

"Well, partially I wanted to feel useful, but mostly I wanted to clear my wand." He admitted. "*Priori Incantatem* will only show the most recent spells cast with a wand. As far as I know, no one should suspect me having anything to do with those stunned wizards, but I don't want to risk someone checking my wand and seeing stunning spells and memory charms."

Both men gave Harry a long look and he supposed he was displaying an unusual degree of caution. The problem was that for someone used to fighting Voldemort and his Death Eaters for well over a decade, the idea of 'excessive caution' was almost laughable.

Arthur looked from Harry to Sirius and back again. "Well, Molly and I have some things to attend to in the house. I'm sure you two have a lot to talk about." He paused with his hand on the door. "Harry, do try to get some sleep tonight."

Harry smiled at his Guardian. "I will. And thank you. For everything."

Arthur smiled back, and a lot of the evenings awkwardness was banished. "You're more than welcome. Merry Christmas too you both." He opened the door and stepped out into the chill night.

Sirius broke the silence that descended after the door shut. "He's a good man," he said.

"The best," Harry agreed.

Sirius looked at Harry for a long moment. "Lilly hardly ever let me around you when I was a dog. She was worried I'd give you fleas or something."

Harry sighed. "Just a moment." It was inevitable that one of his invented early memories would eventually be found out. But there was a chance it wouldn't be necessary. Locking eyes with his Godfather, Harry reached out with his Legilimency and felt for the mind behind those dark eyes.

Harry almost cheered aloud as the probe skittered off of a sphere of blackest obsidian. He dug in again, working from multiple angles, but his strongest efforts glanced off the hardened barrier without leaving a mark. Finally, he smiled in genuine relief. "You're an Occlumens," he said with a note of wonder in his voice.

"You're a Legilimens?" Sirius asked.

Harry nodded. "It's not natural, is it?"

"No," Sirius shook his head. "They were worried some of my family members might try to get information out of me, even though I avoided them for the most part. There were a few who still sought me out, we weren't sure why – either to try and convert me or because they wanted out as well." He shrugged. "It would have been easier to just keep me ignorant of anything important, but James wouldn't hear of it."

"Who trained you?" Harry asked curiously.

"Dumbledore, after James talked him into it," his Godfather answered.



Harry suppressed a surge of jealous anger. Dumbledore had also trained Sirius in the less subtle method that seemed to work better for Harry was well. He wondered how much misery could have been averted if Dumbledore had been willing to train him before. But the old man had his reasons for sending Snape instead, and he paid for it was well.

"It also helped, a little, in Azkaban," Sirius added tonelessly. "It wouldn't completely shut them out, the Dementors, but it did take the edge off."

Harry swallowed. Sirius had also paid for his training, in ways unimaginable to others. "I'm sorry about that. I wish I knew how I could have gotten you out of there faster."

Sirius looked at him, a little confused now.

Harry took a deep breath in and blew it out. "With Snape and... other people... running around using Legilimency on everyone, I've had to be careful what I shared with anyone else. You're the first full Occlumens I've met here that I can trust." He pulled out his wand. "Let's get this out of the way first. I, Harry James Potter, solemnly swear on my magic and my life, that everything I am about to reveal to Sirius Black this evening will be true and factual, to the best of my knowledge."

Sirius squinted against the glare that Harry's oath invoked. "Is that really necessary?" he asked.

"I think so," Harry said. "I've got some things to tell you, Padfoot old boy, that I doubt you'll believe, even with the oath."

Sirius chuckled. "You're James son, all right. But you have to be the oddest twelve year old I've ever met."

"That's just it," Harry corrected him. "I'm not. Or at least not just twelve years old."

"What is that supposed to mean?" Sirius asked.

"Part of me is twelve year old Harry Potter, part of me is a bit older."

Sirius' eyes widened. "James?" he asked in a wondering tone.

Harry felt his stomach cramp into a ball when he realized where Sirius's speculation had gone. Correcting that false hope would kill him, but Harry's Oath didn't leave him much choice.

"I'm sorry, Sirius, but no. The ages are close though, now that I think about it. My older part is the memories of an older version of myself."

Sirius frowned in confusion, though the disappointment was also plain on his face. "How is that possible?" he finally asked. Harry's oath made saying it was impossible an exercise in futility.

"The memories... along with the spirit, and maybe the magic, were sent back in time from the year 2010."

Sirius' mouth dropped open. "Twenty *years*? That's impossible. A time turner can only do a few hours."

"It wasn't done with a time turner," Harry corrected him. "I set up a temporal transit field with enough energy for a nineteen year jump."

"But why just your memories, why not send all of you back?" Sirius asked, but the leery expression on his face told Harry he already half-expected the answer.

"The field can't send back solid matter," Harry explained, "unless you have nearly infinite energy to power it. As it was, I had to wrap the field around myself and then commit suicide so my spirit would get shunted through the field."

"You WHAT!" Sirius roared leaping up from his cot.

"Sit down!" Harry snapped.

"How the hell could you kill yourself!" Sirius demanded, his face red and angry. "I never thought James' son would take the coward's way out."

Harry knew Sirius didn't have the full story yet. He knew the older man was probably reacting strongly because of something that had

happened with someone else. But his last statement took Harry's self control and smashed it to kindling.

"Coward's way out? Coward's way out? Damn you Sirius, I had won! I killed that son of a bitch. I ripped out Voldemort's mind and blew his body into fragments. And then I looked around and realized that I didn't have any reason left to live. Everyone I cared about was dead, starting with you, you careless idiot! How the hell you let Bellatrix kill you I will never understand!" Harry paused, and realized his chest was pumping like a bellows. "I bloody damn well won my effing war, and then I read about a way to travel back in time, and I came here, *so I could do it all bloody over again*, and maybe see if I could do a better job of it this time, so maybe Hogwarts would still be standing, and maybe the people I love could still be alive. So why don't you tell me how that's the *coward's way out*?"

The look of utter horror on Sirius' face made Harry feel even worse. He turned away and swiped at eyes he just now realized were leaking. He jumped when he felt a hand on his shoulder, and the next thing he knew Sirius had grabbed him in a rough embrace.

Harry held onto his Godfather for dear life. Merlin, how he'd missed the man, his father's oldest and best friend. He also realized that this was the first person he'd ever been able to talk to about his whole ordeal. The bits and pieces he'd had to hold back from his friends had festered, like bits of dirt in a healing wound, and the pressure had built up more than he'd realized.

The next thing he knew, he was sitting next to Sirius on the cot, his Godfather's arm across his shoulders.

"You've never been able to talk about this before, have you?" the older man asked.

Harry shook his head. "I'm teaching my friends Occlumency, but it's hard for them. They don't even know why, not really. One of them, Hermione, figured out on her own that Snape was using Legilimency, so she bought us a book on Occlumency. Everyone thinks I'm a natural Occlumens, because of the curse-scar, so they don't question why Snape can't get into my mind."

“That greasy git never gets tired of making things hard for everyone else,” Sirius said in a disgusted voice.

Harry nodded. “So I have to be careful what I say to everyone, otherwise Snape might learn it second-hand.”

“I’m surprised you haven’t tried to do something about him directly,” Sirius observed.

“Well, I am trying to get him sacked,” Harry said, “but there aren’t a lot of accredited potions masters willing to teach at Hogwarts.”

Sirius frowned. “Watch out he doesn’t hear about that. He’s a pretty nasty piece of business when he wants to be.”

Harry nodded. “I know, I watched him murder Dumbledore.”

Sirius’ eyes bulged out. “He what?”

Harry sighed. “Maybe I’d just better start at the beginning.”

Sirius nodded, so that exactly what he did. He described the original timeline in as much detail as he could remember with using a Pensieve. Sirius sat and listened without saying a word... with a few exceptions.

“The Dursleys?” Sirius demanded at one point. “But Lily’s sister detested her...”

Harry nodded. “It wasn’t pleasant either time, less so this last one. But Dumbledore thought I’d be safer under the protection of the blood wards.” Sirius subsided a little at that, but Harry thought he was still likely to have a few words for the professor, and few of them polite.

Sirius nodded thoughtfully when Harry relayed the sequence of events that led to Voldemort’s resurrection. Harry was pretty sure he could hear the wheels turning already.

The battle at the Department of Mysteries also provoked an outburst from Harry’s Godfather. “Bellatrix? How the hell did she manage to kill me?”

Harry sighed. "You know they have this archway in the department of mysteries, have you heard of it?"

Sirius nodded. "Yes, they used it to execute criminals in the old days, didn't they?"

"Yeah, well, you were duelling with your cousin, and you stopped to taunt her when you were standing in front of the archway... and she hit you with a stunner." Harry swallowed. "You fell through."

Sirius' jaw dropped open. "That is the... the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard! Killed by a *stunner*? Because I stopped fighting to *taunt* her?"

Harry shrugged. He didn't know why Sirius was acting so outraged, it was hardly *his* fault it happened. "Try not to do it again, all right?"

Sirius looked offended at that, then broke down laughing. "I'll try to remember that, Harry."

There wasn't much cause for laughter after that. Sirius' hand on his shoulder tightened as he choked out the words to describe the Hogwarts Massacre. When he finished describing the clean up of the bodies, Harry paused to collect himself – he was emotionally drained.

"She was the One, wasn't she?" Sirius asked him in little more than a whisper.

Harry just nodded. He didn't need Sirius to clarify who he was asking about.

"What is it with Potter men and red-heads?" Sirius mused. The arm across his shoulders tightened and Harry felt the lump in his throat soften a little.

Harry felt a little ashamed that he found it easier to describe the utter destruction of the British Wizarding culture that followed. He still found his chest tightening when he described the fates that found each of their friends. Sirius shuddered at Remus' pain-filled end. "I'm glad he and Tonks got together, though I never would have pictured it."

“He said once that she made him laugh, and he hadn’t laughed very much since he became the last of the Marauders.”

Sirius let out a sigh. “Well, she’ll have to find another reason, though I might help her a bit. There are still three Marauders around, and we better not let the number go any lower.”

“I don’t count Peter,” Harry said tightly.

“I’m not counting the little rat either,” Sirius agreed. “Remus, Me, and you, Prongs the second.”

“Me?” Harry asked.

“You.” Sirius said firmly. “Your Patronus is still a stag, right?”

Harry nodded.

“Good. Your Animagus form, if you have one, is likely to be the same, but that’s enough by itself to justify the name. I imagine you gave Remus a good shock the first time he saw it... Anyway, what you’ve described to me sounds like the greatest prank in history, and more than sufficient grounds for your induction into the august ranks of the Marauders.”

“A prank?” Harry asked, his mind refusing to make the connection.

Sirius nodded. “You go back in time to screw with Voldemort’s plans, using all the knowledge you gained in nearly twenty years of fighting him. Once you are here in this time, you fool *everyone*, including Dumbledore, which I’m not sure James and I ever really managed to do. Wherever he is right now, your father has to be grinning like a maniac.”

Harry just stared at his Godfather, who was smiling broadly now. Nothing phased the man. The news of his own demise. The destruction of the world. The deaths of his remaining friends. And here he was, smiling in appreciation of what he saw as an especially good prank. Harry felt himself smiling back.

"I imagine you are making a few changes this time around?" Sirius asked with a raised eyebrow.

Harry found himself describing his first year at Hogwarts in rather greater detail than he expected. Not unexpectedly, Harry found himself giving a play-by-play breakdown of the Quidditch matches, which Sirius relished. Harry's foiling of Quirrell's attempt at the stone with a single stinging hex had the man laughing out loud again.

Sirius also reassured Harry when he wondered aloud at the ethics of how he was manipulating his friends. "Look Harry, do you honestly think that are doing better this time than they did their second year, er, their first second year?"

Harry thought it over and slowly nodded. "Yes, I think they are."

"Are they happier, better grades, better able to defend themselves?" Sirius prompted him.

Harry nodded again.

"Maybe you are just being a better friend than they realize?" Sirius suggested. "It's odd, but you remind me a little of Lily in that. She was always trying to get people to do what was best for themselves and the people they cared about. I think she was responsible for half of the good relationships in our house. I'm not saying she was a match-maker or anything, but she was good at getting people to realize if they really cared about someone or not." He smiled faintly. "Of course, her talent was completely useless where she and James were concerned. In that, you have a leg up on her, though I suppose you do have an unnatural advantage."

Harry gave a weak laugh, but his voice was so shaky it sounded more like a hiccup. He just hoped Ginny, Ron, and the rest agreed with Sirius when they finally could be told the truth.

"I also think," Sirius continued, "that you are letting the Dursleys off too lightly. But I can take care of that while I'm running a few errands."

Harry frowned. Sirius' voice was a little too deliberately light for that to not be significant. "Errands?" he asked.

"Well, you've got these Horcruxes to gather, but you're a little young to be travelling alone, let alone Apparating all over creation. I, on the other hand, as a dashing escaped convict, can go wherever my feet lead me. And if the course of my evasions leads me through Little Hangleton, or near Twelve Grimmauld Place, or near any other hidey-holes... well, no one would suspect a thing, would they?"

Harry felt his stomach tighten, but didn't voice his initial protests. Instead he thought it over as rationally as he could. He had been wondering when he'd get a chance to do all these things, and now Sirius was offering himself as a surrogate to gather the Horcruxes before Voldemort grew wary and moved them. "The Cup needs to be last," Harry finally said. "There was some kind of charm on it that alerted him when we touched it. That led him to attacking the school. Also, be careful about that ring. Something around it destroyed Dumbledore's hand when he removed it."

Sirius nodded. "Tell me everything you can remember about them, and that little ceremony you described when Voldemort was resurrected. I may be up for a bit of grave robbing as well."

It was close to three in the morning before Harry finally got to bed. He felt utterly drained, like an old husk. Sirius pumped him for every detail Harry could recall, and there were more than he suspected at first.

Confiding *everything* in his father's best friend had also acted to drain Harry of his own doubts and ethical concerns. Sirius listened to him castigate himself for manipulating everyone around him, then told him he was being too hard on himself. Harry had no idea how freeing that could be.

He fell asleep the instant his head touched the pillow.

An instant later, Ron was shaking him awake. Harry blinked blearily at his friend.



“Every other day of the year, you’re awake before the sun, Harry. But on Christmas you want to sleep in?” Ron shook his head. “You’re barmy.”

Harry scrubbed at his eyes and sat up. The light filtering through the curtains was proof it was daylight, even though it felt like no time had elapsed. As he sat up it hit him. He hadn’t had any nightmares, even though he’d been asleep more than long enough for them to start.

Harry pondered this as he looked dully at the stocking full of brightly wrapped packages laid across the foot of his bed. He’d left his presents in Mrs. Weasley’s care, all wrapped and neatly labelled under the tree. He just wasn’t sure how she distributed them so neatly, and without waking anyone.

The first present was a book, oddly enough, from Percy. *Wizarding Duelling Code* was the title, and Harry set it aside for future reading... but not before noticing the bookmark placed in the section regarding ‘targeting of spectators’.

Charlie had evidently heard about the duel as well, because he sent Harry a pair of dragon hide duelling gloves. They were fingerless, with a metal plate sewn onto the back and small metal ridges over the knuckles. They were reputed to make one harder to disarm, but Harry was more impressed by how much damage they would do with a punch. He hoped Charlie enjoyed the Playwizard subscription that he’d clubbed up with Ron and the Twins to get him. Arranging to have an American wizarding periodical shipped to Romania once a month was a little more expensive than anyone anticipated.

Bill sent Harry a book as well, *Wards: Construction and Disruption*, along with a short note explaining that the eldest Weasley brother learned more about the basics of curse-breaking from that book than almost anything else he ever read. Harry chuckled to himself when he recognized the title. It was one the Ministry had placed on the restricted list, meaning only licensed professionals could purchase it. He wondered if Bill knew that... then he realized that was probably what had prompted his decision. *I hope he’s enjoying his new job even more than tomb-raiding*, Harry thought to himself with a smile.

Ron and Ginny's names were on the next package. Inside, Harry found an adjustable leather wand holder. The instructions indicated that it could be attached to one's belt, or strapped around the forearm. Harry looked up at Ron, who was smiling.

"We figured that one of these days you were going to wave your arm and have your wand come flying out of your sleeve," Ron said. "Plus, we couldn't see you wearing long-sleeve shirts all summer. Ginny couldn't anyway..."

Harry was too happy to allow himself to be baited. "You going to put those pads to good use?" he asked.

Ron frowned. "I'd like to, but it's a bit early, innit?"

Harry shrugged. "I talked to Oliver about starting up a reserve team again, and he seemed interested. If nothing else, you'll get some serious practice before he graduates. I don't see anyone else in Gryffindor stepping up to take his spot."

Ron blinked and coughed. "Really? I mean, you don't?"

"You've already got the eye," Harry said nonchalantly, "and if you keep growing the way you are, you'll have more than enough arm span to do the job."

Ron was quietly thoughtful as Harry emptied out the stocking. Mrs. Weasley had knitted him another jumper in emerald green, which seemed to be his colour as much as maroon was Ron's.

Under the jumper was a small box from Fred and George. Inside the box was a small container of chocolates labelled 'veritamints – eat one and tell nothing but the truth for five minutes' and a newspaper clipping.

It seemed that one Vernon Dursley, formerly of Surrey, had appeared at his scheduled labour board hearing to protest his dismissal from Grunnings. At some point he caused a disruption of the proceedings and not only had his petition dismissed, but was found to be in contempt, fined fifty pounds and spent the night in jail.

Harry laughed out loud as he read this, prompting Ron to ask what was so funny. When he explained, Ron was amused, but even more he was in awe of how his brothers managed to sabotage Vernon's court appearance without getting caught leaving Hogwarts.

The last object in the toe of the stocking was a small box. Inside, Harry found a silver pocket watch with a note:

Dear Harry,

In the course of my 'checking up on a few things', I went through the crime scene materials from Godrick's Hollow. As you have no doubt been told, there wasn't much left of your parent's cottage after the fire, nor were their personal effects spared. However, one of the evidence bins did contain this watch, which had been ruined by the fire. There's a rather good clock-maker on Diagon Alley who specializes in custom work. She was able to replace the mechanism and restore the exterior. I don't know if this belonged to your father, your grandfather, or someone completely unrelated to you, but I thought you might like to have it.

-Merry Christmas,

Arthur Weasley

Harry had some difficulty finishing the note. He ran his fingers over the cover of the watch, which was engraved with the image of a stag.

It was a while before Harry was able to shower and get dressed. As an early riser, he wasn't so used to having to wait for the plumbing. Of course, he was very aware of how long he had to wait, because he was frequently looking at the silver pocket watch that he knew had been his father's.

By the time he was done, Mrs. Weasley was already setting out the light lunch intended to tide everyone over until the planned Christmas feast. Harry found Fred and George at the bottom of the stair, talking intently as they passed a thick black soft-cover book back and forth between them.

“Hello gentlemen, I must say that your gift was *highly* appreciated, and Ron is losing his mind trying to figure out how you pulled it off.” Harry said in a grand tone. “I see that you have also found my gift to yourselves. Have I perchance altered your appreciation for fine Muggle literature.”

George was visibly biting his tongue, so Fred took up the gauntlet. “It might be slightly amusing,” he said in a bored tone. He shrugged. “We’ll let you know. We do appreciate those ingredients though. They should prove right useful for the coming term.”

Harry made a clucking sound and shook his head. “I suppose I lose the bet then. Here, I’ll take that back and use the money to get you some more asphodel, or-“

“Let’s not be hasty now,” Fred interrupted quickly, intercepting Harry’s hands with his raised palm. “We really should at least give it a chance, you know, to be fair and all.”

“That’s all right,” Harry said smoothly, reaching again for the book. “You don’t need to spare my feelings. Ginny and I won’t die of embarrassment. I’ll just take that worthless Muggle book back and...” He tugged on the book, but George refused to let go.

“He’s not buying it, o’ brother of mine,” George said, breaking his silence.

Fred let out a defeated sigh. “I suppose he isn’t.”

Harry smiled, feeling a trifle smug. “I had you the second you saw the title, didn’t I?”

Fred made a face, but George just nodded- a trifle morosely.

“Well, you’ve got until January twenty fifth before you can pull another prank,” Harry said, smiling. “Of course, it’ll take you almost that long to read *1001 Practical Jokes and Dirty Tricks*.”

George nodded more cheerfully and Fred looked thoughtful. “You know, Harry, you could, er, not mention the terms of our bet. That

way everyone would go spare over the next thirty days wondering what we're up to. In a way, you'd be pranking the whole school."

*I'm already doing that*, Harry thought to himself. He mulled it over for a minute, and then nodded. "All right, but only as long as you two behave yourselves."

"Harry!" Fred said in a shocked voice, "when have you ever known us to misbehave?"

Christmas dinner was just as big a production as Harry expected. Mrs. Weasley's kitchen table, magically expanded for the occasion, almost literally groaned under the weight of the dishes it supported.

Remus arrived by Floo at precisely five o'clock on the dot. From the way the man's eyes bulged out, Harry didn't think he'd ever seen anything like a Weasley Christmas either.

Harry felt momentarily bad for Sirius, stuck out in the shed. He'd taken it upon himself to slip out of the house and bring his Godfather some breakfast, only to find that Arthur had already beaten him to it. Harry tried to keep the man company as long as he could with raising suspicions, until finally Sirius himself sent him back inside.

"Harry, I'm warm, I have food to eat, and there are no Dementors around. This is the best Christmas I've had since 1980. I'm serious."

"And I'm Harry. I still wish..."

"Hearing you make lame jokes about my name, something only James would stoop to, I might add, makes it even better. Now get back in that house before you make someone suspicious. You've got a new family waiting for you in there, and not many people get that precious a second chance." Sirius' voice softened for a moment. "Don't blow it, Harry."

And so Harry found himself taking Remus' cloak and hanging it in the hallway. When he returned, he found Remus asking Arthur if there was any word on Sirius.

“Oh, er, yes. Well, no new word at the Ministry,” Arthur replied carefully.

“I imagine he’s doing well, wherever he is,” Harry added quietly.

Remus looked from Arthur to Harry and back again. “I... see. Well, I do hope he’s staying out of trouble.”

“That’s hardly likely,” Harry said, “unless he’d travelled as far away as America.”

Remus’ eyes widened and Harry felt like a heel. While nothing he said was a literal lie, he still hated to mislead the man. Unfortunately, if he still ended up teaching at Hogwarts next year, he’d be in close proximity to Severus Snape, especially during the disorienting after-effects of his ‘monthly problem’. Harry didn’t want to let him worry needlessly, but he also knew that being too direct would put Sirius’ neck in a noose.

“Perhaps,” Remus said carefully, “some of us have more to be grateful for during this holiday season than they realize.”

“Perhaps,” Arthur agreed.

Following tradition, the Weasley children were seated around the table in order of their ages. This left Harry between Ron and Ginny, which he did not mind in the slightest. She wore the copper butterfly hairclip he gave her above her left ear, and it flashed with glints of candlelight.

The meal which followed set even Hogwarts’ best to second place in Harry’s reckoning. Mrs. Weasley, and Ginny as her mother reminded everyone, had outdone themselves. The enormous goose that Arthur carved was as flavourful as it was juicy, and one bite of the chestnut stuffing convinced Harry that it was worth any number of long walks into Ottery Saint Catchpole.

Lingering over pudding, Mrs. Weasley asked Remus how he was doing.

"Quite well," he replied, "in fact, I understand that the Defence Against the Dark Arts position may be opening up after this year, so I've owled my curriculum vitae to Professor Dumbledore with an inquiry."

Percy gave Remus a long look after hearing that. Harry couldn't tell if it was disbelief that the shabby-looking man was applying, or respect that he was qualified enough to think he even had a chance of becoming a Professor.

"Well, I think you'd be brilliant," Harry said.

"It's not like he's got a tough record to beat," Fred added.

"Not with the 'great fake' and 'what's that in the back of my head' as predecessors," George agreed.

"We'll keep Hermione off your case," Ron volunteered.

"From what I've heard, I think she'd be a delightful student," Remus said with a laugh.

"I'll bet you used to nag your schoolmates about studying, didn't you?" Ron asked warily.

"Well, sometimes," Remus agreed. "James and Sirius weren't always the most focussed of..." His voice trailed off as he looked from Ron to Harry, who was having difficulty keeping a straight face.

"There's at least one in every generation," Harry said with a smile at his friend.

"I suppose there must," Ron said gloomily. "Now I just *know* he's going to replace Lockhart this fall."

Harry smiled at his father's friend. "I'm sure you and Hermione will get along splendidly."

"I'm just not so sure about the rest of us surviving next year," Ron said.

“Be nice,” Harry chided his friend.

“All right,” Ron agreed. “But remember we’ve only just gotten her calmed down a bit. If he encourages her too much, we’ll be back to the beginning of first year again.”

“Ron,” Harry asked airily. “Have you ever known Hermione needing to learn the same lesson twice?”

Ron frowned. “Good point.”

“Besides,” Harry continued, “if you keep working on her with her flying, that’s less time for her to get worked up about her revising, right?”

Ron nodded, and Harry turned back to Remus, who was frowning in confusion. “We have a friend,” he explained, “who is just a bit mad about her grades.”

“Just a bit,” George added.

“Like Hagrid’s just a *bit* large,” Fred chimed in.

“Boys!” Mrs. Weasley said in a warning tone.

“Anyway,” Harry continued, “she’s picking Lockhart to pieces every class, pointing out inconsistencies in his books and asking questions about them. We’re just saying we’re sure you two will hit it off.”

“Which is good,” Ron added, “because she’s scary brilliant.”

Remus smiled faintly. “I’m sure we will.”

With that, the dinner conversation moved on to lighter topics. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley told about their first Christmas together with baby Bill. Remus relayed a time he and his classmates had all been stranded at Hogwarts over Christmas by a nasty blizzard and a collapse in the Floo network.

All in all, it was a very enjoyable dinner. All too soon, they were clearing the plates, and Remus was thanking his hosts.



As he shook Harry's hand, Remus said, "I hope a certain reprobate is having a good Christmas, wherever he is."

"I'm fairly certain that's exactly what he's doing," Harry replied, looking the werewolf directly in the eye.

Remus gave that faint smile again, one that almost seemed to a trademark of his. "We'll have to get together and discuss our sources of information some day," he said with no small amount of irony.

"Some day," Harry agreed, deadpan.

After their guest left, Harry and Ginny began clearing the table with help from her brothers. With the extra hands Mrs. Weasley drafted, the table was cleared and the dishes washed in no time. This proved to be providential, because the short sleep the previous night, and the excitement of the day left Harry stumbling over his own feet.

Harry was lurking in the kitchen, wondering if too many people were still awake for him to bring Sirius a snack, when Arthur walked in with his jacket still on from outside. The man started, but relaxed when he seemed to recognize Harry. From under his jacket, Arthur produced a bottle and plate that he quickly placed in the sink.

"I see we had the same thought," Harry observed.

Arthur nodded. "Makes me sick to think someone in the Ministry gave orders for him to be deliberately starved."

"It is a disturbing thought," Harry agreed. He felt a little sick as well, watching the anguish on his Guardian's face. "By the way, I never got to thank you for the watch. Sirius said he gave it to my father when he got married."

"Really?" Arthur asked with a pleased smile.

"Yes," Harry confirmed. "It was actually a present for both of them, because my Mum used to get after him about being late all the time." Harry was annoyed to find his voice getting constricted as he repeated Sirius' words.

"I... well..." Arthur seemed to be getting a little choked up as well. "I'm glad you liked it, Harry. I had a watch like that once. I passed it on to Bill for his seventeenth birthday. It just... felt right that you should have your father's watch as well."

Harry Potter stood there, on the evening of Christmas, with his father's watch in his hand, staring at another man who'd become much the same to him in a very short period of time. "Mr. Weasley, don't take this the wrong way, but if it weren't for people like you and your family... well, I'd probably be in Australia, or America, or some other place where Voldemort would never find me."

A/N:

As discussed in my previous author notes, I am now working full time and my update pace has taken a serious hit. 50-55 hours a week I was spending on writing and editing are now being spent as a spreadsheet jockey and on my unpleasantly long commute.

Plot discussions and individual Q&A will be addressed on my yahoo group ([viridiandreams](#), see my author profile for the link) A lot of interesting discussions are taking place there as well, as well as some looks at my original fiction.

Thanks for reading!

-Matthew

## Chapter 25

For Harry, this was one of the most abnormal holiday seasons he'd ever experienced. No looming threat of war, no one murdered yet, staying with people that were actually glad to have him there; it was utterly bizarre and without precedent. Even in his younger memories, Harry didn't have many happy holidays. Aside from the Dursleys competing to make him miserable as they spoiled their own child, he'd always spent most of the Christmas season wondering how things would have been if his parents were still alive.

It wasn't that Harry stopped missing his parents – there was an empty place inside that would never be completely filled – but he supposed it was natural to miss people more when he actually had some memories of them.

And now he was seeing the various Weasley Christmas traditions unfold, and wondering if his parents would have had a live tree. Perhaps the ornament his father made for McGonagall was Quidditch-related as well. Maybe a broom, or a Quaffle, Harry wondered, and resolved to ask his Transfiguration Professor if she remembered. Sirius didn't remember; being distracted at the time by a rather elaborate prank he was pulling on a stuck-up red-haired witch named Lily.

Not that he'd gotten away with it, of course. The corner of Harry's mouth quirked up as he remembered the pride in Sirius' voice when he described how she turned his plan back on him.

Ginny gave him a questioning look, but Harry just shook his head. They were in the kitchen at The Burrow, waiting for the first arrivals for an informal New Year's Eve party. It required some hasty negotiations through owl and Floo call before they arrived at a time and place. Augusta Longbottom had been invited to a Ministry celebration that Neville successfully escaped. The Grangers were likewise attending a celebration at some dental association that Hermione was less than enthused about. "Being paraded about like a particularly clever pet" was how she described the last one she'd attended. It wasn't that her parents felt that way – she told Harry that

most of their colleagues just didn't know how to react to a little girl that despised being talked down to.

Luna said she could put off finishing her story for The Quibbler about Nargle trap construction. Harry did not ask for any details beyond that.

Mrs. Weasley hadn't objected to them coming to The Burrow. She and Arthur didn't have anything planned, and the majority of the people were already there. However, once the decision was made, the Weasley matriarch acquired a very determined air and a steely glint in her eye. Ron observed all of this with an expression on his face reminiscent of a trapped animal. After that, Harry watched the woman descend into what one of the twins described in a tense whisper as her "apocalyptic house cleaning frenzy".

The two days leading up to the thirty-first were quite full, as the inhabitants of The Burrow seemed to be all but taking it apart and putting it back together again – cleaning all the bits and pieces as they did so.

Harry, who was used to doing all the cleaning at Number Four Privet Drive without assistance, followed her instructions without a word. He later heard Mrs. Weasley bring this up when Ron began to grumble.

Harry froze, just around the corner, when he heard Ron's reply. "Mum, Harry's used to those Muggles making him do all their cooking and cleaning, he'll never complain no matter what you ask him to do."

Harry did his best to show no reaction as he walked into the kitchen. "Bedrooms are done. Ron, why don't you help Percy in the attic, and I'll go see if your dad needs any help with the shed." He left quickly, ignoring the expressions on their faces.

Mr. Weasley, of course, immediately volunteered to see to his beloved shed. Only Harry knew that he'd done it to prevent Sirius from being discovered, rather than to keep his Muggle junk from being thrown out. "One of these days," Harry muttered to himself, "I'll be done with all these secrets."

As he approached the shed where his godfather was hiding, Arthur emerged and carefully latched the door behind him. "He's asleep

again,” Mr. Weasley said in a low voice. “I think he was in worse shape than he let on.”

Harry nodded, having entertained similar suspicions himself.

Arthur’s face clouded over. “I promise you Harry,” he said soberly, “one day we will track down the people responsible for his treatment and extract the full punishment the law allows.”

“If it’s possible,” Harry agreed, which earned him a questioning look from his guardian. Harry paused, considering if now was the time to take another step. The less concealed, the better, he concluded, especially in case something happened to him. “If Voldemort somehow finds a way to come fully back to life, I expect we’re going to see another war again - at least, until I can get to him. You know,” he continued in a thoughtful tone, “I don’t think he knows the full prophecy, or else he might not have been so eager to confront me last year. Anyway, if that happens, I think some of those people infiltrating the Ministry might end up caught up in the conflict, which wouldn’t break my heart at all.”

“You’ve given this a lot of thought,” Mr. Weasley said after a moment.

Harry nodded. “Starving someone to death, locked in a cage, is pretty monstrous. I have no doubt that people willing to do that would follow Voldemort in a heartbeat. You’re going to be a target if things go bad, so please keep an eye on the people you work with.” Harry’s voice went a little unsteady at the end. He could still remember that awful scene at St. Mungo’s when Arthur finally succumbed to the poison from Lucius Malfoy’s dagger.

Arthur nodded thoughtfully as he replied, “I’ll admit I’ve had a few more questions in the cafeteria since Lucius’ arrest. Some of them may just be idle curiosity, but...”

“But some of them probably aren’t,” Harry said, finishing the thought.

Arthur chuckled, surprising Harry. “You remind me of someone Molly’s brothers introduced me to, an old Auror named Moody. He was always after everyone to practice Constant --”

“-Vigilance,” Harry said completing the motto along with his guardian.

Mr. Weasley blinked in surprise and Harry wanted to kick himself. “Er, I have a friend at Hogwarts, and his dad’s an Auror.” Which was true, Neville’s father had not entered another profession. “I’ve heard stories about this bloke named Mad-Eye Moody, always going on about ‘Constant Vigilance’,” he continued. Which was also true – Harry heard plenty of stories from Tonks, Kingsley, and other members of the Order.

“I suppose he is quite a memorable chap,” Arthur agreed affably.

Harry suppressed his desire to let out a sigh of relief as they walked back to the house. He was getting rather sloppy lately, and he didn’t really know why. Was he just getting that comfortable around the Weasleys? Or was his subconscious getting just as sick of all this secrecy as the rest of him? Talking to Sirius had left him feeling better than he’d thought possible since he had that first dream about his future self. Now he wanted to come clean with everyone else, especially his friends. The ones closest to him were the ones that worried him the most. He taken steps to help them as much as he could, to become all that they could be, but a less charitable interpretation was that he’d manipulated them from the start.

It didn’t matter if they hated him for it, Harry reminded himself. His future self failed to keep them alive, and now it was his turn. Keeping them all alive was more important than hurting his feelings. They probably *would* hate him, and they’d be right to. He was doing things that he’d condemned Dumbledore for, though he honestly didn’t see a way around it - not with Snape around. Maybe they’d eventually forgive him, if he survived removing Tom from the picture. And if he didn’t, none of this touchy-feely stuff mattered anyway. What he did know was this: Right now his friends could probably outfight their future selves when they’d gone to the Department of Mysteries on his fool’s errand. Even if they didn’t want to have anything to do with him after learning the truth, Harry hoped that knowing what was to come would encourage them to continue training with each other.

Of course, Harry reflected as Arthur went upstairs and he waited with Ginny near the kitchen fireplace, his objectivity was questionable

where the youngest Weasley was concerned. It was true that he'd gone to great lengths to draw her out of her shyness, so she'd have the most reason to resent him - and her hatred would wound him the worst. But he also had memories of her talking about her first years at Hogwarts, and how miserable and alone she'd been. He couldn't let her go through that again, even if it meant losing her again. If Ginny were to turn against him, it would be devastating, but if that was what it took to keep her alive, so be it.

Harry sighed and his thoughts returned to his godfather in the shed. He'd suggested attending the party in his other form, so he could get to meet Harry's friends, but Harry didn't think that was a good idea. Snape might see an image of him in their memories and make the connection.

"Come on, Harry," Sirius cajoled. "What's life without a little risk?"

"Longer," Harry replied, deadpan.

"James would have thought it was worth it," Sirius said quickly.

"I'm not James," Harry snapped, "and I've learned not to assume that everything will work out all right."

Sirius got a pained look on his face. "I didn't mean it quite like that."

"I know," Harry said with a sigh, "and we're both probably going to poke each other's sore points every time we talk. I think that's part of being a guy."

Sirius chuckled at that and the awkwardness between them faded.

Harry was distracted from his circling thoughts when the fireplace roared and the green flames spat out Neville Longbottom, who looked around curiously as he straightened up. Neville was wearing formal black robes, which he promptly started pulling off when he saw Harry and Ginny in jumpers and trousers.

"I told Gran that it wasn't going to be that kind of party," he said, his voice muffled as he pushed the fabric over his head, "but she insisted I be 'properly attired,' just in case it was."

Neville jumped a little when the Floo roared again. Luna didn't miss a beat as she stepped out of the fireplace and helped Neville with his robes.

"Thanks, Harry, I er -" Neville said when he got his face uncovered and saw Luna.

Luna was wearing a light blue knee-length dress that was the same shade as her eyes. Her hair was arranged in somewhat less than its usual disorder and was held in place by a plaited circle of mistletoe. She frowned thoughtfully at Neville, who was standing there in trousers and a plaid button-up shirt. "I suppose I am the one overdressed now," she said with a sigh. She raised her hands to the top button on the front of her dress.

Harry had to bite his tongue at the panicked look on Neville's face. "That's okay Luna," he said, struggling not to laugh, "we're not really picky about fashion here."

Luna nodded and let her hands fall to her sides. "That's good," she said absently, her eyes still on Neville's beet-red face, "I think without my dress I'd have been a little too informal anyway."

Harry looked over at Ginny, who had her lips pressed together in what he knew was an effort to avoid laughing out loud.

Ron saved her from rupturing herself by walking into the kitchen. "I heard the Floo, is everyone here?" he asked.

"Just waiting for Hermione," Harry said. "She still has to go across town to use someone else's Floo."

Ron frowned. "Someone really ought to see about getting them hooked up to the network," he said.

"I think she's still working on her parents," Harry agreed.

At that point the Floo fired up again and Hermione stepped through, wearing a heavy coat. Ron actually remembered his manners, to Harry's mild surprise, and took her coat and hung it up in the hall.



Mrs. Weasley came in as he returned and shoed them all out into the sitting room.

The evening passed in a fun, but rather sedate fashion. Ron couldn't sucker anyone into a chess match, so they all played Wizarding board games with Fred and George, who cheated outrageously. Percy looked rather bored with the whole thing and soon retired to his room.

Harry hadn't had much opportunity in either lifetime for playing Wizarding games, so he was rather intrigued. Snitches and Seekers was a rather obvious choice, involving little animated figures on brooms that chased a tiny snitch across an elaborate checkerboard. Players had to roll dice to move their Seeker, while the Snitch moved on its own in random patterns.

After some suspiciously spectacular dice rolls, Hermione excused herself from the game so she could devote all of her attention to monitoring Fred and George. Every so often she would catch them cheating and they would change tactics. Harry was just amazed that they'd worked out so many ways to cheat, though it was probably just to annoy Percy.

Rather than getting annoyed themselves, Fred and George's grins just got wider every time they were caught. Harry wondered about this, until he remembered their words about recruiting Hermione to help with their pranks. He had to suppress a chuckle as he recognized the game within the game within the game he was witnessing.

Truth be told, Hermione seemed to enjoy trying to catch them more than playing a game which was at least fifty percent luck. Instead, she was engaged in a struggle which was one hundred percent mental. Not to mention that the twins' playful demeanours kept everything on a friendly level.

Dragon-Hunt was a little more cerebral, and it evidently tapped into some of the same strategic thinking as Wizarding Chess, because Ron easily dominated that game.

Harry was a little distracted, because he noticed something odd. The twins seemed to be playing an inordinate amount of attention to Hermione – if he didn't know them better, he'd swear that they were flirting with her. First they praised her astuteness in being able to catch them out when they switched the dice. Then they began asking her questions about her transfiguration classes, and listened with rapt attention as she described an extra credit project she was doing for Professor McGonagall. He wasn't the only one to notice that, either.

Ron began to frown, and then scowl as the evening wore on, but he didn't say anything. Harry waited until George was heading into the kitchen for a butterbeer before he made his move. Draining his mug as well, Harry got up and followed the red-haired young man out of the room.

Harry cleared his throat as George filled his glass and took a sip. George turned to look at him with a blasé expression that Harry recognized as his 'dealing with interrogators' face. "Something I can help you with, Harry?" he asked in a bored voice.

"Yeah," Harry replied in a drawl and then leaned forward and snapped "You could explain what you and Fred are getting at in there."

George flinched a little, seemingly in spite of himself, before he shrugged. "What? My brother and I can't pay attention to a pretty, unattached young lady?"

"Not if you two are playing games again. She's a very good friend of mine, and I *don't* want to see her hurt," Harry said firmly. Then he smiled. "Although I'm sure certain of our team mates might find this topic of conversation fascinating."

George's face took on a trapped expression for a moment, but then he sighed. "You are getting damned tricky to put anything past, Harry. And I mean that as a compliment. So - you may have noticed that my brother and I are a bit handier with potions than our grades reflect."

Harry nodded, but didn't say anything.

"We're also rather good at charms," George continued modestly, buffing his nails on the front of his jumper. "All in the name of a good prank, of course. But we chanced to overhear a conversation back at Hogwarts. It seems that Professor McGonagall was discussing our favourite bushy-haired little witch, and described her as the best Transfiguration student she'd had in a generation, perhaps the best in her career. Now, of course, we can't let such a talent go to waste at the Ministry, or some other, lesser cause, now can we?"

Harry groaned. "You know Ron is likely going to kill both of you. And if you do anything to hurt her, I'll help," he growled.

"Oh, we're counting on it, ickle Harrikins, we're counting on it," George chuckled. "Ron is quite good fun to wind up when he doesn't catch on to what you're doing, without all the scariness that happens when The Boy Who Lived At The Burrow gets irritated. If our attentions persuade him to - act on his feelings, so much the better. A girlfriend is almost as good as family and we'd still have access to her most marvellous brainpower if anything were to - arise."

Harry stared at George Weasley, shocked at the rather cold-blooded way they were going about this. Of course, Harry wondered if their ploy could help some of his 'social objectives' along as well – not that he could easily make them stop without creating a mess and ruining the party... Though it never hurt to take the wind out of the Twins' sails when given the opportunity. "If anything were to arise?" Harry asked sardonically, "You mean at that joke shop you two are cooking up?"

George's eyes widened and his mouth actually fell open.

Harry savoured one of the few times he'd actually caught Fred or George off-guard. "Oh come on," he chided the older boy, "it's fairly obvious. You and Fred spend most of your time coming up with new concoctions and new magic for your pranks. Would you really spend all that time on it, if you weren't planning to make some sort of career out of it?"

George didn't answer that question, for which Harry was glad. Instead he laughed out loud. "Oh my, Harry. You are definitely going to keep

us on our toes! Not even Mum has an inkling about that, and we'd prefer to keep it that way."

"Good," Harry replied. "You can trust my discretion, and I will trust your discretion where Hermione is concerned. Don't rub Ron's nose in it too hard. I've spent no small amount of time nudging those two towards each other, and I don't want you Johnny-come-lately's mucking things up. Besides, if you crowd Ron, he's likely to muck things up so bad that Hermione would never speak to him again."

George nodded, a wry smile on his face. "Not a problem, Old Man, you see, over the long haul, Weasleys *are* irresistible." He then made his exit from the kitchen, sipping his butterbeer.

Harry let out a sigh and barely remembered to refill his drink before he went back to the sitting room.

For the most part, the rest of the party went well. Fred and George became a little less obvious with their flirting, and Ron subsided a little. Harry did notice that Ron was still being a little more attentive toward Hermione than usual. Possessiveness wasn't a particularly attractive personality trait, but it did at least indicate that he was interested. Hermione had always been a little insecure about everything non-academic, and in a weird way it was probably reassuring to her that Ron was completely unable to hide his jealousy. Harry just needed to make sure his friend expressed his feelings in more constructive ways this time around.

Not that he seemed to be doing so badly on his own. To Harry's eye, Ron was making an effort to stay civil with everyone, aside from giving his brothers a few withering looks. Neville didn't even appear to notice, though it was fair to say he was more than a little distracted by Luna. The blond witch sat next to him on the couch, and as she leaned forward to watch the game, she just happened to be supporting herself by placing her hand on Neville's knee. Her behaviour appeared innocent enough, but Harry also noticed Mrs. Weasley giving the girl a few odd looks as well.

Hermione, however, was a bit more alert, and her eyes flickered back and forth uncertainly between Ron and his brothers. Ginny, sitting

curled up in one of the armchairs, also appeared to notice, but her expression was of unabashed amusement. Harry suppressed a groan.

Somehow they made it to midnight with no blood being shed.

Harry hadn't given much thought to traditions regarding what happened as the year turned. Others, however, were better prepared. Before the countdown ever started, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley went into the kitchen 'to prepare a special treat'.

As the minute hand snuck up on the number twelve, George clapped his hands. "Children, the traditions must be upheld," he said cheerfully. Neville looked mystified, Ron looked nervous. As the chimes echoed from the Wizarding Wireless, Fred and George looked at each other, sighed in unison and each took a piece of left over mistletoe from their pockets and tossed them to Hermione and Ginny with rather sadistic leers.

Luna needed no prompting; when the clock began to strike midnight she gave Neville a very long kiss on the lips. Harry watched his friend turn magenta, wondering why he was even surprised at this point.

Hermione glared at Fred and George before tossing the sprig back to them with a percussive "Honestly!" She then looked at Ron, who was sitting perfectly still, though his ears were already red. With a sigh, she leaned close to Ron, whispering "Happy New Year, Ron."

With a convulsive motion, Ron quickly leaned forward and kissed her on the cheek. In a flash, he was back in his seat and glaring furiously at an amused Fred and George. Hermione seemed as composed as McGonagall, but Harry noticed a small smile on the corner of her mouth.

Ginny looked first at the clock and then at Fred and George, who were smirking at her. Her left eyebrow went up into a sharp curve that Harry's future self had identified as a danger sign. She tucked the sprig into her hair and marched over to Harry.

For his part, Harry's feet were rooted to the floor. You didn't dare Ginevra Weasley to do something, and then expect her to back down. Not the Ginny Weasley another Harry Potter had known, and not the

Ginny he saw in front of him now. This fact was about the only bit of cogent thought in his head, as he was locked in a panic as to what he should do next.

Ginny grabbed a handful of the front of his jumper and pulled. He remembered another kiss from another time. His hands moved to her shoulders of their own accord, but his lips bussed the crown of her forehead instead of her intended target. As it was, this position put his nose just above her hair, and her scent triggered an avalanche of misplaced memories that threatened to undo him. Harry knew he squeezed her shoulders in an effort to keep his hands from shaking, and he had no doubt she noticed that as well.

When Harry pulled back, Ginny was frowning up at him, with a strange glistening in her eyes. He tried to smile, but he feared his efforts were a trifle lop-sided. He squeezed her shoulder again, trying to express something he didn't know how to say, but she smiled uncertainly and stepped back, letting go of his jumper.

Fred had his mouth open to say something, but George elbowed him rather sharply and he changed his mind.

Mrs. Weasley emerged from the kitchen with a large tray in her hands. For Christmas, Kingsley Shacklebolt had given them a panettone he brought back from Italy, and Molly was cutting the sweetbread into thick slices and passing them out on small dishes of her best china.

Harry tried to enjoy the treat, but he could feel Ginny's eyes cutting towards him every so often. He didn't know why he'd reacted the way he had, only that the entire situation felt - wrong - somehow.

Soon everyone was getting ready to leave. Hermione's parents would soon be arriving at the Leaky Cauldron to pick her up, and everyone else's parents would soon be seeking their beds.

Harry noticed Luna whisper something into Neville's ear, and for once he wasn't blushing furiously. Instead, he nodded and smiled at the girl. Then he walked up to Mrs. Weasley and thanked her for having him over. "I just wish my home was more like yours," he concluded. Mrs. Weasley was blushing furiously, but Harry didn't think he'd seen her

so happy all night as she patted the dark-haired boy on the arm and handed him his formal robes.

Harry forced a smile as he saw his friends off. They were all taking the Hogwarts Express back to school in a couple of days, but he still got an unsettled feeling whenever he said goodbye. Objectively, he knew it was just an echo of future paranoia and grief, but that didn't make it go away.

Sleep did not come easily that night. Harry finally gave up around four in the morning and crept out of the room he shared with Ron, after pulling trousers and jumper on over his pyjamas. He had some vague notion of walking the inside of the wards, but that went flying out of his head when he saw Ginny, in her nightdress, curled up on the couch.

Harry found himself staring at her face. Her features were relaxed with slumber, her lips slightly parted. She looked so innocent, this girl who'd never been tormented by Tom Riddle. Just the sight of her gave him a dull ache in his chest. He vaguely remembered some other feelings as well, but this body was just starting puberty, and the reality of this Ginny was drowning out the memories of the older, taller version from his future past. The thought of what could happen to her in this time line drove him to the brink of madness. He knew he'd do whatever it took to keep that from happening, but this Ginny wasn't *his* Ginny - there were still walls between them; walls of time, walls of lies. Things he'd had to do, but still...

Harry suspected she'd come down here hoping to talk to him after everyone had gone to bed. But instead of waking her, he removed a quilt from the linen closet and tucked it around her. She stirred in her sleep, smiling. Harry looked at her for another long moment, and then he straightened, checked his wand in the holster attached to his wrist, and stepped outside to walk the grounds.

Everyone slept in a bit the next day, even Mrs. Weasley. Harry, who didn't sleep at all, had a rather sumptuous breakfast ready for his surrogate family as they stumbled down the stairs. Mrs. Weasley thanked him fondly, even as she insisted he needn't have gone to the

trouble. Ron and Ginny, on the other hand, were eyeing him rather suspiciously.

Harry avoided giving either of the two youngest Weasleys a chance to talk to him privately. It wasn't all that hard. Despite its size, the main house had eight people in residence, and the cold rain outside encouraged everyone to stay inside. Catching an unwilling Harry alone was almost impossible with everyone milling about.

Of course, subtle manoeuvring is useless when someone *completely different* button-holes you at the top of a flight of stairs. Harry stumbled as Percy gripped his elbow and steered him, quite firmly, into the older boy's room.

"Oh Percy, this is so sudden!" Harry quipped in an airy falsetto, trying to buy time.

"Don't be an idiot, Harry," Percy snapped.

"Does Penelope know about us?" he asked, bringing the other boy up short.

"You've been reading my post!" Percy snarled, outraged.

"Oh please," Harry said dismissively. "Gentlemen do not read each other's mail. I do have eyes, though; I can see how you act differently around her, how hard you're trying to impress her. I didn't read those psychology books for nothing, you know. And I haven't breathed a word of this to Fred or George."

Percy paled, though his eyes still blazed. "I'm not the only one hiding something, Potter."

Harry snorted, though his mind was racing. "And what am I supposedly hiding, Percival?" he asked contemptuously.

Percy began ticking points off on his fingers. "You have an odd talent for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. You act far too mature for a second-year. You know too much magic for a second-year raised by Muggles. Your magic itself is too powerful for someone your



age,” the boy concluded with a scowl. “Who are you, really? When did you sell out for Dark Magic?”

“Very impressive, Percy,” Harry said. “How long did you have to argue with the Sorting Hat to avoid Ravenclaw? Of course you conclude that I’m a dark wizard and then decide to confront me, alone, without a wand in your hand.” Harry moved his right hand forward as he finished, and the wand he’d removed from his sleeve jabbed the older boy in the stomach, making him flinch. “Maybe you really do belong in Gryffindor after all,” Harry concluded. He sighed. “For your information, I haven’t been normal since the night my parents died.”

Watching the fear blossom in the older boy’s eyes, Harry was surprised at how he still held his ground. Harry also became a little disgusted with himself. This was the man who reportedly stayed at his post in the Ministry when Voldemort attacked, fighting to buy time for most of Scrimgeour’s staff to escape – at the cost of his own life. Misguided as he’d been, Percy hadn’t been a coward.

He rotated his wrist holding the wand up between them, and spoke. “I swear upon my magic that I am Harry James Potter, son of Lily and James Potter and I also swear that I am acting to benefit the interests of the members of the Weasley family, provided those members stay loyal to the family themselves.”

Percy frowned even as he squinted at the glow coming from Harry’s wand. “What the blazes is that supposed to mean?”

“It means this, Percy,” Harry said in a tense whisper. “I don’t know you that well, but I do know that you like power. You enjoy being a prefect, but that’s just the beginning for you. One of these days you are going to have to make a decision. You’re going to have to decide exactly how far you are willing to go for power. If you turn against your family, then my actions may not be in *your* best interests.”

Percy’s eyes went wide with shock and denial. “I would never do that,” he said in a shocked voice.

Harry was taken aback by the genuine revulsion he heard in the boy’s voice. How did this Percy become so much at odds with his family in a few years? Did he still hold an idealized image of Arthur Weasley at

this time? Or had someone manipulated him farther down the line? Harry held out his wand, his face a mask of granite. "Prove it," he said.

Still outraged, Percy gingerly took hold of Harry's wand. "I, Percival Ignatius Weasley, swear upon my magic, that I will do nothing against the best interests of the Weasley family." The glow was much more subdued than when Harry had sworn, but it was still a Wizarding oath. Percy was scowling as he handed the wand back to Harry. "I will have you know that while my parents are acting as your legal guardians, your name is still Potter, and my oath does not include you."

"Fair enough," Harry said, and then smiled as he felt a surge of triumph. If Percy was hedging on including Harry, then he obviously meant what he said where the other Weasleys were concerned. "And to answer your next question, yes I am up to something. Several somethings, depending on how you count them. I'll let you know what is going on when I know Snape won't find out."

"If you are trying to help my family," Percy observed coolly, "I'd be breaking my own oath if I told him and he interfered."

Harry shrugged. "I didn't say it would be voluntary. Snape is a practicing Legilimens, and can pull the memories right out of your head without you knowing."

That little revelation rocked the prefect back on his heels. "How do you know this?" he asked, eyes wide.

"Hermione figured it out," Harry explained. "She's smarter than both of us put together. That's just one of the reasons Snape hates her."

Percy pinched the bridge of his nose. "Does this have something to do with all the meditation you lot have been practicing?"

"Yes," Harry said blandly. "Occlumency is a technique for blocking Legilimency. I can loan you the book she found if you promise to keep it hidden."

“Why haven’t you reported him to Dumbledore?” Percy asked, as he seemed to gather himself again. The wide-eyed look of shock was replaced with a thoughtful frown.

“What makes you think I haven’t?” Harry replied calmly. Percy was much easier to deal with like this. He made a mental note to talk to Fred and George. “He knows. Dumbledore is a Legilimens himself, and although he’s stopped trying to do it to me himself, he won’t make Snape stop. He’s supposedly using it to keep tabs on the Slytherins and keep the school safer,” he continued in a bitter tone.

“All right, Harry,” Percy said in a resigned tone. “Get me the book; I’ll play along for now. But if I see an opportunity to deal with this situation, I’m going to take it.”

Harry nodded. “Fair enough. Can I ask you to consult with me before doing anything? There are factors which prevent me from taking action that I can’t discuss right now. You probably don’t want to run afoul of them either.”

Percy blinked, but returned Harry’s nod. “I can accept that, but I don’t consider us friends.”

“I am aware of that,” Harry agreed with just a touch of irony.

Percy gave him a sour look. “Under the circumstances, I think we have some common interests. Pursue those, and don’t let me catch you doing anything I’ll have to take action on.”

“I can’t promise that won’t happen,” Harry said carefully, “but I won’t go looking for it either.”

With that, they rather formally shook hands and Harry continued up to the room he shared with Ron, pondering the puzzle of the third Weasley child.

The Hogwarts Express was returning on the Sunday afternoon before start of term, so Arthur was off from work and decided to drive them all to King’s Cross in the Anglia. They made a stop in the village, no doubt arranged by Mrs. Weasley, and picked up Luna as well. After joining them in the magically expanded rear seat, the blond girl

explained that her father was pursuing a Sirius Black sighting in Cornwall.

Harry kept his face carefully neutral at this news, and was pleased to note that Arthur gave no indication he'd even heard her words. After returning to The Burrow, he'd be introducing his wife to her unknown guest. Mr. Weasley was confident that his wife could also do a much better job of restoring the escaped convict to full health.

Provided she didn't hex them both first.

Harry supposed that the man knew best how to handle his wife, and Mrs. Weasley's compassion usually overruled her temper when both were invoked. All the same, Harry was glad that revelation would occur after he was safely far away. And out of ear-shot.

Harry was a little nervous about riding in the car again, and noticed that Ginny subtly manoeuvred herself so she sat next to him. He was a little touched that, despite any hard feelings she may have had regarding his behaviour on New Years Eve, she still wanted to make sure he was all right for the car ride.

Despite his concerns, he only had a few twinges when he sat down in the back seat. At least he had recollections of his last time in there to shroud the worst of his memories. Ginny's elbow resting on top of his while she talked to Luna helped as well. He stared at her hands, folded on her knees, and marvelled at how tiny her fingers really were as he dozed off.

Harry hadn't really intended to nap all the way to King's Cross, but that was exactly what he did. The sound of a car door opening finally roused him, but he snapped fully awake when he realized that almost everyone in the Ford Anglia was staring at him. He felt his face reddening, even though he had no idea what had just happened.

"Well then," Mr. Weasley said suddenly, "we don't have too much time. Better get you loaded before the Express leaves without you."

Harry's surrogate family slowly began to move. Fred and George were smirking, Ron and Ginny looked concerned and a little scared, but worst of all, Percy was looking very thoughtful. Harry fought down

a rising sense of embarrassed panic. Had he said or done something in his sleep?

As they sorted out the trunks and began to carefully slip through the barrier onto Platform Nine and Three-Quarters, Harry edged up next to Luna, who seemed the least affected by whatever had happened. "Er, Luna?" he asked in an undertone.

"Yes, Harry?" the girl replied blandly.

"Did - did something happen while I was asleep?" he asked.

"Why yes," she answered. "We rode from Ottery St. Catchpole into London."

Harry fought the urge to say something coarse. "I mean, did anything unusual happen?"

"Well," she said thoughtfully, "there were nine people inside a Muggle automobile enchanted to comfortably hold more people than a trolley car. I suppose that is a bit unusual. I'm also fairly sure I saw a fump-gizer nest in a hedgerow we drove past."

Harry sighed. He really wasn't at his best at the moment, and getting a straight answer out of Luna was proving to be a challenge. "Luna, why was everyone staring at me?"

"Oh," she said quietly as they moved forward and stopped to watch Fred and George weave through a crowd of back-packers. "They were probably a bit surprised by what you were saying."

"What I was saying?" Harry asked stupidly.

"When you were asleep," Luna clarified.

Harry tried to maintain a façade of calm as his heart gave a rather large thump. "What did I say in my sleep?" he asked, dreading the answer.

Luna turned to look at him. Her gaze seemed unusually focused behind her silver wire-rimmed glasses, and Harry felt distinctly

exposed. "You seemed to be quite angry with someone. You kept saying 'you can't have them this time' and 'I'll kill you first.' You also used some words I'm going to have to look up when we get to school. But from the look on Mrs. Weasley's face and the grins Fred and George were wearing, I can probably guess. You stopped talking, though, after Ginny began rubbing your forearm."

"Oh," Harry said. *Bugger*, he thought.

Luna faced forward as it was their turn to approach the barrier. The crowd of people was rather heavy for a Sunday afternoon, so Harry's attention was mostly occupied by steering his trunk.

Once they cleared the illusionary wall, the two of them made for the growing cluster of red-heads gathered on the chilly platform. Harry almost didn't notice when Luna began speaking again.

"I don't see why they are so surprised," she said, picking up their conversation again with no preamble. "Whatever you have to do, which you can't tell us about until everyone learns Occlumency, is obviously unpleasant. If I had to do something I didn't want to do, and wasn't allowed to tell anyone about it, I'd be rather cross as well. Oh good, there's Neville."

With that, she veered off to park her trunk next to Neville and his grandmother. Harry watched as she greeted them both, and he was pretty sure he didn't imagine the frown that momentarily passed over Augusta Longbottom's face.

Harry tried to relax as he brought his own trunk to a halt. It didn't seem like he'd spilled the beans. What they'd heard could just have easily applied to his parents as well. As for the language, he could say he'd learned those words attending public school.

Sirius was right. The longer he tried to maintain this deception, the harder it would become. Their conversation after dinner last night had been unusually serious.

"Once I get my strength back," Sirius promised, "I think I'm going to do a bit of travelling. While I can't compete with your on-going prank, I think that nicking Voldemort's Horcruxes and destroying them would

qualify as my personal best.” His face lit up in an evil grin. “Can you imagine his surprise next time you nail him and he finds out his life insurance has lapsed?”

Harry couldn't help but smile as years seemed to melt away from his godfather's face. “I'm looking forward to it,” he said, “but you better be careful, or else.”

“Or else what?” Sirius demanded impudently.

Harry frowned thoughtfully for a moment. “Or else I'll have you buried in a dress. I'm sure Mrs. Weasley has a nice frock I can borrow. Pink sound good?”

The look of horror on Sirius Black's face was priceless. Then he laughed out loud. “All right, Harry, I'll be careful. Don't want to know what James would say if I showed up in the afterlife wearing a dress.”

Harry smirked, but the bone-bending hug he received when he said good night was worthy of Mrs. Weasley.

But that conversation was just one more reason for Harry to be tense as they boarded the train. He was entering enemy-held territory again, just as Sirius would soon be doing. There really weren't any viable alternatives, but that didn't mean he had to like it.

Everyone was still a little subdued as they said goodbye and the students boarded the Hogwarts Express. Percy left for the Prefects car, and the spring in his step told Harry he expected to see Penelope there. Fred and George also split off to ride with Lee Jordan and their Quidditch team mates. The six first and second-years settled in the last carriage again.

As soon as the train began moving, Harry locked the compartment door and tapped it with his wand. He noticed Hermione frowning at him curiously. “If someone opens the door without us knowing, it'll make a loud noise,” he explained.

Hermione looked mildly impressed. Which was only right, Harry reflected - it had taken her nearly two days of Charms work to invent that spell while they were searching for Voldemort's Horcruxes.

Harry still didn't know if the door had just been unlatched before, but he wasn't taking any chances this time. He also had Tom Riddle's diary in his pocket, rather than his trunk. It was safer to carry it until his trunk was back in Gryffindor Tower.

When he sat down, he noticed everyone was eyeing him again. "What?" he asked. "On the way home, we all fell asleep. When I woke up, the door was ajar. I'm just making sure if it happens again..."

Hermione nodded slowly. "So you're just being careful," she said as her fingers scratched Crookshanks' fur. As soon as he was let out of his carrier, the huge kneazle-cross draped itself across as much of Ron and Hermione's laps as it could cover. Harry was amused to note that this also required them to sit rather close. He wondered, not for the first time, exactly how smart that cat really was.

Ron snorted. "I don't think careful is the right word for Harry. He used some language in front of Mum that I didn't think anyone could get away with."

Hermione looked at Harry, obviously shocked. Harry felt his face heating up.

"He was asleep, you prat!" Ginny snapped. "And having one of those rotten nightmares you've badgered him about. Mum wasn't about to punish him for that!" Harry was surprised, and secretly pleased, that their recent awkwardness hadn't stopped her from coming to his defence.

"You were talking in your sleep, Harry?" Hermione asked. "About what?" She looked around curiously.

"I don't think we should..." Neville began, faltering when Ron sent him a glare. He swallowed and set his jaw. "I think we should leave it alone."

"I agree," Luna added. "Harry will tell us when he can, probably when our Occlumency is good enough. I imagine that's all part of his plan."

"Plan?" Hermione asked curiously. "What plan?"



Harry felt himself frozen in place. He couldn't say a word, one way or another, without risking giving even more away. Snape could still, with effort, pull the knowledge from their minds. Any answers he gave, positively or negatively, would probably highlight those memories in their minds. Hermione, in particular, would pay special attention to anything he said that could be seen as a clue. That attention, Harry knew, would make that memory stand out even more. In some ways, her extremely logical and well-ordered mind would be a liability for concealing such sensitive information. That's probably one reason why she was Snape's favourite target. Harry scowled, damning the Potions Professor all over again.

"Do you know what she's talking about?" Ron asked Neville.

Neville just shrugged.

"I don't know exactly what it is," Luna replied, "but he seems to have one. He's training us and making little improvements here and there." She paused and glanced at Neville with her head cocked to the side. "I mean, look at me - I'm not as alone as I thought I'd be at Hogwarts. Neville said he used to be painfully shy, and in the past he was even a little afraid of that unpleasant boy he pounded." She smiled warmly. "I liked watching Neville do that, it made me feel very special. Anyway, we seem to get along better than most Gryffindors our age, and I'm sure that's Harry's doing as well. Harry's plan seems to involve making us better, helping us work together as a team, so naturally I want to see where it leads. I also don't think we should do anything that might interfere with it."

Harry wanted to sink into the seat as he felt everyone's eyes on him. "Er, thanks for the vote of confidence, Luna. Will you lot accept a rain check until we can all keep Snape out? I promise I'll explain everything at that point."

"Everything?" Ginny asked in a small voice.

The look on the girl's face rammed an iron spike through the pit of Harry's stomach. "You can ask me anything you want then," he told her.

Ginny seemed to rally a bit, and raised an eyebrow. "You know, I might just hold you to that," she replied.

Harry shrugged. "Appearances aside, I don't like secrets."

The rest of the trip was uneventful, for which Harry was glad. Delicate confrontations and emotional upheavals seemed to exhaust him worse than duelling. He also supposed he was paying for his irregular sleeping habits.

After a couple of rounds of exploding snap, everyone settled down for a quick Occlumency practice. Harry was pleased to see the improvements everyone was making. At this rate, their minds would be secure before the end of term. Then he would know the answer to the question he was dreading: whether he'd still have any friends after they knew the truth.

Hermione also quietly confirmed Harry's suspicions about Ginny's defences. While Harry seemed able to bypass them rather easily, Hermione found her to be one of the most difficult to approach. The bushy-haired witch's own progress with Legilimency was slow, but fortunately gauging how tough someone would be didn't require nearly as much skill as actually breaking in.

Harry was glad this wouldn't set them back, but he was also curious as to why this would be the case. He didn't know if they shared some unusual mental affinity, or if it was just due to their close friendship. For purposes of his timetable, it didn't really matter.

Everyone needed a break after such sustained mental effort, and the witch pushing the tea trolley knocked on their door at just the right time. Harry jumped up from his seat to deactivate the door alarm and his stomach gave an audible growl when he saw the contents of her cart. He promptly bought an armload of snacks and bid the smiling witch good day.

Ron frowned a little when Harry began passing out his largesse, but held his tongue. Harry knew he could always remind the boy of the two weeks of home cooked meals he'd just enjoyed with the Weasleys, but he was happier that Ron seemed to be mastering his

pride on his own. Ron and Hermione also hadn't argued yet, which had to be some sort of record.

Harry was soon soaring on the crest of a sugar high, but he still felt weary as he let his transfiguration book lie flat on his lap. Ginny was sitting cross-legged on the seat next to him, frowning down at her History of Magic book. Harry leaned against the window, staring into space. On the opposite seat, Hermione was reading ahead in charms. As she usually did, she mouthed the words silently as she mimed the wand motion with her forefinger. For some reason, the sight of her lips moving soundlessly disturbed him. As he dropped off again, he started to remember why...

Perhaps thinking about the alarm spell primed him to dream about the end of Hermione's participation in the ill-fated Horcrux hunt. The war had ground on for most of a decade, destroying much of England as the Muggles pointed fingers and blamed terrorists, foreign governments, and even aliens. Voldemort's recruiting methods let him gain the upper hand in a bloody war of attrition, and the three of them were pretty much all that was left of the resistance. But one of them was the Boy Who Lived, and Voldemort would never rest easily while Harry Potter still drew breath.

But the ambushes were growing more and more frequent, and as good as the three of them became at using stealth and mobility to foil superior numbers, the Golden Trio's luck eventually ran out in Bristol.

The Death Eaters were no match for them, but their last opponent got off a final hex as Harry's *Reducto* tore him apart. Without thinking, Hermione shoved Ron out of the way, only to have the cutting curse strike her squarely in the throat. She collapsed in a boneless heap before Harry even realized she'd been hit. Ron stumbled from her shove, and turned back, frowning. His eyes bulged when he saw the crimson flood pouring from his wife's throat.

Harry's wand was a blur as he cast healing charms as fast as he could. Even as he forced the words out of a throat gone tight with panic, a more rational voice in the back of his head knew it was a useless effort. From the angle of the wound, and the way Hermione dropped and laid perfectly still, the curse must have severed her

spine. The best healers at the long-destroyed St. Mungo's would have been hard-pressed to stabilize his friend. A trash-strewn back alley didn't offer racks of potions, and even if they knew of a place that did, they'd never get her there in time.

So he watched helplessly, even as his magic poured over her, while Ron propped her up, carefully cradling her head. Her eyes were open and lucid, but her mouth moved wordlessly. Her destroyed throat wouldn't allow her to speak, but Ron seemed to divine her meaning as her eyes flickered from her husband to her best friend.

"Yes, luv, I'll take care of Harry," Ron whispered as he brushed the hair back from her forehead. He let his hand trail down to her cheek. She smiled then, and closed her eyes. The blood stopped flowing and Harry knew she was gone.

Harry's eyes snapped open. He fought the urge to do something immensely destructive. That was not a scene he'd wanted to relive. Ever.

His mind was still caught up in the future memories as he tried to calm his racing heart. Ron kept his last promise to Hermione, though he and Harry were usually taking care of each other, as each would have their own bad days and when they both had one at the same time, like on her birthday, there was always Firewhisky - until he lost Ron and the Boy Who Lived became the Only Boy Who Lived.

Harry made a concerted effort to get his emotions under control again. Even if his friends would accept his temporizing, there were others who would be less understanding. He took a deep breath and sighed.

The sight of Hermione and Ron studying together was a balm for his anguish. As far as this reality was concerned, that scene never happened. As far as Harry was concerned, it never would.

He felt a light pressure on his shoulder and knew Ginny was leaning against him again. He turned to give her a smile that he hoped didn't look as fake as it felt.

Harry found himself hoping Peter escaped from the Ministry. He wanted this over with. He wanted Voldemort in front of him again, so

he could kill him and be free. He wanted this whole mess over and done with so he can get on with his life, so he can see whether it would be Ron or Neville who got a clue first. So he can relax and just wait to see what Luna does next.

Ginny's eyes were questioning, but she smiled back at him regardless. Harry's stomach lurched as he remembered his impatience to round up the last of the Horcruxes so they could all get on with their lives. If they hadn't all been so eager, would things have happened differently? Better?

There were no guarantees, even with his advantages. Harry knew he needed to remember that.

They made it back to the castle without incident, for which Harry was grateful. He was still a bit unsettled from the journey, and he didn't trust himself to hold back if provoked. Filch would be annoyed if there were bones imbedded in the walls.

They did see Draco at dinner that evening, but he was unusually subdued, sitting between Crabbe and Goyle and eating without conversation. Harry supposed the boy might have received word of his father's arrest. If Draco was any indication, Lucius' situation might be worse than Mr. Weasley thought. Harry resolved to share that information in his next letter home. If the Slytherins can send their kids to Hogwarts to play at being spies, there was no reason others couldn't.

After that, things settled back into their routine. The weather meant that their morning runs were usually around the courtyard, but running in snow was also good for building up calf muscles and improving one's balance. The occasional comic relief when someone went arse over teakettle was just a bonus.

Luna began behaving even more oddly than usual during their martial arts practices. When Harry paired off with her to spar, she began moving in a very peculiar manner. When he threw a face-level punch, she lurched to the side, avoiding it, and then stumbled forward and brought the heel of her hand up toward his jaw. Harry blocked the strike with his forearm, but it came surprisingly close.

Frowning, Harry spun backward and sent a round-house kick towards Luna's head. She bent backwards at the waist, letting the kick pass harmlessly over her. She then moved in with a circling, staggering motion that almost got around Harry's guard when she hooked a ridge-hand strike towards his floating ribs.

Harry blocked that one too, and stepped back, making a quick 'time-out' gesture. "Luna, what the hell was that?" he asked.

Luna straightened up and made a face. "I suppose it wasn't very good was it?"

Harry frowned. "It's not that," he said quickly, "you almost hit me twice. I just haven't seen you move like that before. What is that?"

"Oh," Luna said, brightening. "Well, our neighbours are Muggles, and Father likes to be sociable. So, at least once a week, we go over to their house, or they come over to ours for dinner. Muggles tend to eat the oddest things, but it's usually tasty and often educational."

Harry blinked. Luna Lovegood was one of the oddest witches he knew. He couldn't imagine how the Statute of Secrecy remained unbroken. "I see. But what does that have to do with how you are fighting?"

Luna blinked. "Oh yes. The first time we went there during holiday, they were watching a program on what they called the 'telly'. Though it seemed to be more of a 'showy' because it had moving pictures in addition to the sound. It seems much more interesting than the Wizarding wireless. You've been in Muggle houses before, don't you agree?"

Harry struggled to keep his composure and gently guide the conversation back to his original topic. "You have a point, Luna, but what does this have to do with you staggering around like you've been drinking Firewhisky?"

"Well, that's the whole point, isn't it?" She asked, frowning a little. "Oh, yes. The programme they were watching on the 'Telly' was about an old man who knew martial arts. But he did it quite differently from how we do it. They called it Drunken Style kung fu or something like that. I

watched how he did it and practiced it a bit while I was home. It looked like it would be very surprising and quite fun to do.”

Harry blinked. He noticed that Hermione and Ginny had also stopped and were listening in. “So you just picked it up from watching it on the telly?” he asked carefully.

Luna nodded. “But I’ve had to practice to get my feet to move right. It’s a bit trickier than it looks.”

Harry grimaced painfully. “Luna, I think that’s just something they made up for the movies. I’m not so sure this is a good-“

“Actually,” Hermione interrupted, “I think it was probably based on ‘Drunken Monkey’ Kung Fu. All the staggering and odd moves seem to match the descriptions. I ran across a few references to that when I was researching different styles.”

“I see,” Harry said slowly. “I don’t suppose you can see if we can find some books on it? Luna might want a little more - source material - than a movie she saw once.”

Hermione nodded seriously, though her eyes were sparkling with suppressed laughter. Just for that he made her switch partners with him.

“Maybe I’m getting too old for this,” he muttered as he ducked under Ginny’s lightning-fast round-house kick.

At least their classes were predictable. Snape was as horrid as usual, and invented some pretext for giving Harry detention at least once a week. The others didn’t fare much better, and as their Occlumency improved, his temper seemed to worsen. Harry wasn’t entirely sure what would happen if they were all able to block him out, but it promised to be very ugly.

Their other classes went very well though. They were earning top marks in Charms, Transfiguration, and Herbology. As Harry predicted, studying with them also seemed to help Ginny and Luna. Harry’s letters had given Ginny a leg up, and without her housemates

sabotaging her, the would-be Ravenclaw was proving to be even more formidable in the academic arena.

Defence Against the Dark Arts was still proving to be a bad joke. Lockhart was still completely off balance, and Hermione seemed to take a particularly vindictive pleasure in questioning him about every inconsistency in his lectures. Harry suspected it was a combination of embarrassment over her prior crush and anger at the man for not living up to her expectations; not that he was likely to run that theory by Hermione at any point in the near future.

Harry was relieved when he received his first letter from The Burrow after their departure. Arthur assured him that his wife had taken nothing amiss at their security precautions. Instead, she was completely furious that Professor Snape's regular invasion of her children's minds made such measures necessary. She was a bit less sanguine about Sirius' physical condition, and she was fairly sure he had at least a low-grade case of pneumonia. Because of the delicacy of lung tissue, this was nearly as difficult to treat in wizards as Muggles. His godfather was anxious to be off about his 'nasty little scavenger hunt', as he called it, but Molly was adamant that he undo years worth of abuse done to his body before she let him out of her sight.

Harry was somewhat glad circumstances allowed him to forgo witnessing, especially hearing, that little confrontation.

The embryonic Duelling Association began on the second Saturday night in January. As Harry suspected, without the threat of Voldemort, not to mention Harry's more publicized encounters with the Dark Lord, the initial interest was lukewarm.

As it was, only Seamus and Dean showed up the first night. Harry, remembering seeing their bodies in the courtyard after the Hogwarts Massacre, spent almost the entire two hour session working with them. Despite any differences he may have had with them in the original time line, they'd both stood their ground to defend the school.

By the time they were done, both new-comers could cast both shield charms and disarming spells quickly and without a lot of effort. Working with his friends, Harry had already developed a good eye for



when someone was making unnecessary wand motions when casting. It was picky, tedious work, but training it out of them gave each boy a significant increase in speed.

All this left both Seamus and Dean sweating and exhausted, but they were clearly appreciative of what they'd learned. Harry only hoped that word spread through the Gryffindor grapevine.

Quidditch practices resumed with Oliver's typical fervour. True to his word, he organized a reserve team, who would use their old brooms to practice on. Ron, Ginny, and Neville immediately signed up. Hermione and Luna stayed out of it, though. The former, so she would always be in a position to levitate anyone who fell, the latter, because playing would make it more difficult to watch Neville. That last revelation effectively ended the conversation as the Longbottom boy turned bright red.

Harry watched with satisfaction as Oliver showed Ron some basic keeper tricks and subtly built up the boy's confidence. Fred and George, already impressed by Neville's upper-body strength after watching him demolish Draco, showed the boy some of the finer aspect of Bludger-beating. Ginny was a little shy about approaching the older girls who made the Gryffindor chaser trio a well-oiled scoring machine. Her fears were for naught, as they felt a certain affinity for any female that had to put up with Fred and George for her entire life. Ginny also discovered that her family memories were a treasure-trove of blackmail material. Harry supposed that might have been part of the reason for what happened on Valentine's Day.

Oliver's caution seemed to be well-founded. Despite their devastating defeat at the beginning of the season, the Slytherin team was playing hard. Cho Chang remained at St. Mungo's during the winter holiday, and the Ravenclaw captain had been training his back-up Seeker mercilessly. Harry didn't know if Cho's presence would have made a difference in the outcome of the game, because the Slytherins on their new brooms trounced the Ravenclaw team, nearly as badly as the Hufflepuffs. Unless Gryffindor beat the other teams outright, it would come down to point totals, and the Slytherins were making it a point to run up the scores in their victories.

As February approached, the Duelling Association gained a few more members. Lavender and Parvati showed up, probably at the urging of their classmates. Fred and George came to the next meeting, and Harry acquiesced to their request for a mock-duel.

Ten seconds later he was *Enervating* both of them.

They took the next one a bit more seriously, and lasted almost thirty seconds. When Fred objected to his use of martial arts stances, Harry congratulated him for being observant and asked when it became illegal to dodge. The rest of that session became a workshop on how to move and dodge efficiently, without telegraphing or losing your balance.

After that, some of the older students, mostly from the Quidditch team, began to show up. Most of the Gryffindors seemed to realize that they weren't going to learn much from Lockhart, even the witches.

Professor McGonagall was a bit perturbed to hear they'd actually been fighting in there, but was mollified when Harry explained they weren't using anything more dangerous than stunning spells. She even began sitting quietly in the back of the room, observing the sessions, and giving Harry pointers afterwards.

Harry was glad of this when, the first weekend in February Draco Malfoy showed up, flanked by Crabbe and Goyle. He didn't even seem to acknowledge anyone else, and marched right up into Harry's face.

"Duel me, Potter," the haughty blond spat.

Harry suppressed a groan. He guessed that Lucius must have wriggled out of the worst of the charges if his son was feeling his oats again. "If you wish, Draco. Stunners and Disarms only."

"Coward," Draco sneered. "Are you afraid of getting hurt?"

"By you?" Harry asked. "Hardly. But I did make a promise to Professor McGonagall that we wouldn't-"

"I don't care what you promised that old hag," Draco snarled, but he stopped in confusion when several people behind him gasped out loud.

Harry swore he could feel the temperature within the room drop as Minerva McGonagall stood up, her lips compressed into a paper-thin line. "Mr. Malfoy," she said in a crisp voice, "I believe we have an appointment with your head of house."

"Professor," Harry said, making her pause as she approached the shocked Slytherins, "request permission to issue a formal challenge to Mr. Malfoy for insulting my head of house."

McGonagall frowned, though Harry thought he saw a hint of something else in her eyes. "Duelling of that nature has been outlawed by the Ministry."

"Not on the Continent," Harry said respectfully. Percy's Christmas present was proving more useful than he'd thought.

Professor McGonagall's left eyebrow raised a half an inch. "Indeed. Be that as it may, permission denied, Mr. Potter. I will deal with this personally." With that, she marched the three of them out of the room.

Harry frowned as the room broke into an excited babble of whispers after they left. When had Draco become this clumsy? The boy never exercised what Harry would call good judgment, but he was usually more circumspect than this.

After a moment of thought, Harry shrugged and called the class back to order.

The next day, in another part of the castle, the agent-in-place was becoming increasingly frustrated. The potions, so carefully and subtly administered, had done their job well. Unfortunately, his cats-paw seemed to be even more unstable and impulsive than anticipated.

Well, his 'patron' wanted him to use all means at his disposal, and he'd done so. Whether those means would be good for anything afterward was not his problem. The last communication he'd received had been quite clear on that point. The objective must be achieved.

Fortunately, the week-long detention would not interfere with the timeline. That would be... unfortunate... after the lengths he'd gone to in order to set up that particular chain of dominoes.

And so one of the few minds worthy of being associated with his house considered the possibilities and planned for all possible contingencies.

As Harry anticipated, Professor Lockhart began promoting the idea of a big Valentine's Day celebration, no doubt hoping to divert attention away from his abysmal lessons. Fortunately, with his perspective, Harry was more amused by the ridiculous decorations than embarrassed.

As they filed into the Great Hall after their morning practice, Harry smirked at the lurid pink robes worn by the self-obsessed professor. Snape looked just as disgusted as he remembered, but McGonagall seemed more amused as well. *Perhaps*, Harry thought, *it's because she doesn't have students in the Hospital Wing this time around.* Harry squinted to avoid being blinded by pink glare from the walls as they made their way to their usual seats.

"Happy Valentine's Day," Lockhart shouted, showing more teeth than seemed possible. "I'd like to thank the forty-five people who have so far sent me cards! Yes, I have arranged this little surprise for you all, and it doesn't end here!"

Harry rolled his eyes as Lockhart introduced his valentine-delivering cupids – dwarves in little golden wings and carrying harps. None of the dwarves looked too happy about the situation either. He wondered as well if anyone would be stupid enough to take the smarmy git's advice to hit up Professor Flitwick and Professor Snape for advice on Entrancing Enchantments and Love Potions. It might be worth the detention for skiving off a day of classes, just to sit in the back of the potions lab in his invisibility cloak and watch.

Hermione got a very disapproving expression on her face, and Harry knew she didn't need Legilimency if she could see his face while he plotted.

It wasn't that Harry forgot his own bit of personal melodrama associated with this day – he just didn't think that, of all things, would be repeated. He and Ginny were still friends, and most of the unease between them from New Years Eve had dissipated. But he couldn't see this Ginny doing it any more than he could the Ginny he eventually dated in his sixth year.

So he was a little surprised when a dwarf poked him in the stomach, bringing him to a halt as they made their way to Charms. "You 'Arry Potter?" it growled.

"Yeah?" Harry said cautiously. He knew he could probably fight off the dwarf better this time around, but it hardly seemed worth it.

"I've got a musical message to deliver to 'Arry Potter in person," the dwarf said as it unlimbered its harp.

Harry took a deep breath. "Right. Let's hear it then."

*His eyes are as green as a fresh pickled toad,*

*His hair is as dark as a blackboard.*

*I wish he was mine, he's really divine,*

*The hero who conquered the Dark Lord.*

Harry let out a chuckle as the dwarf finished. It didn't seem like he would ever escape this poem. On the other hand, he didn't really understand why this had mortified him so badly before. Sure, it was a little overblown, but it is a valentine after all. Maybe Fate was on his side in this regard? Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw Ginny standing next to Luna, frozen in place as her face began to redden.

"Well that was just pathetic," Draco sneered from behind him. "Are you that desperate for attention, Potter?"

Harry shrugged as he turned to face the Slytherin boy approaching with his bookends, Crabbe and Goyle. "Not really, I just thought it was funny. Why so outraged?" Harry asked, "Jealous you didn't get one?"

Draco's eyes flickered from Harry over to Ginny and his sneer became a nasty leer. "There's only one thing I'd possibly want from her, and it's not verse as cheap and tawdry as everything associated with her so-called family."

Harry and Ron were both reaching for their wands, but stopped when they heard another voice. "Fifteen points from Slytherin, for unprovoked, malicious, and degrading insults!" Percy pushed through the crowd, his face almost as red as his hair.

"You can't do that!" Malfoy snarled at the prefect.

"I have the authority to deduct points from *any* student breaking the rules," Percy corrected him. "Your comments violated section 5, paragraph c of the Hogwarts student code of conduct. You are, of course, free to appeal my ruling by lodging a formal complaint with my head of house."

Draco spun on his heel and stormed off down the corridor, muttering things under his breath that Harry had no doubt would have cost Slytherin even more points if they'd been audible.

"The rest of you clear out and get to your classes. The bell rang three minutes ago!" Percy called out as he continued down the corridor.

"Thanks Percy," Ron said quietly as his brother approached.

"I'd have taken twenty points from Gryffindor if you'd pulled your wand out," the elder Weasley said severely.

Ron frowned, but Harry just smiled. "Then it's a good thing you made that unnecessary, isn't it?" he said lightly.

Percy shook his head as he walked off. Harry turned toward the crowd of first years. Luna was talking to the dwarf that just accosted him, handing the bandy-legged manikin a folded piece of parchment. Ginny stood there with her back to the wall, looking like she wanted to sink into it.

“Looks like everyone considered your poem to be a big joke,” Pansy Parkinson sneered as she walked by. Ginny gave a visible flinch and Harry knew she was but a moment from bolting down the corridor.

Harry found himself with conflicting feelings regarding Ginny lately. He cared about her, and he was pretty sure it was for herself, not for whatever ghosts were still flitting around his memories. At the same time, his entire persona, the Harry Potter she thought she knew, was in large part a fabrication, a deceit played upon her and her entire family. Harry didn't feel comfortable getting any closer to her while that was the case. Part of it was a question of ethics, but he also knew that if she rejected him, it would hurt even worse. He didn't want to betray her trust either, not again.

But looking at her like that, embarrassed, mortified, with every dread she had of not being respected or taken seriously by her family becoming manifest... Harry couldn't stand back and let it happen. Not and be the kind of person he wanted to be. He stepped forward and put his hand on her shoulder. She froze in place, but he could feel her trembling a little. “Well, / thought it was brilliant,” he said and gave her a quick kiss on the cheek.

Ginny froze in place, eyes wide.

“See you at lunch,” he said jauntily.

Luna pulled on Ginny's elbow, giving Harry a small smile as she got Ginny moving down the corridor.

Harry turned around to see Ron staring at him. “Let's get to Charms,” Harry said quickly, hoping to forestall his friend.

As likely as making the sun rise in the west. “What the bloody hell was that all about?” his friend asked.

Harry sighed. “I'm not letting anyone make her feel like that, Ron, nobody. You're forgetting the first and the second rule of Gryffindor.”

Ron frowned. “Fine, I understand how ‘Gryffindors take care of their own’ applies. But what's the second rule?”

“Never let Slytherin win,” Harry said as he got them moving down the corridor again.

Of course, that wasn’t the end of it.

Ginny was quiet throughout lunch. She seemed okay, though, so Harry didn’t question it. They braced themselves when another dwarf trooped up to their table, but he just handed a folded parchment to Neville with a bow. Neville read the paper and swallowed. He looked up from the note and gave Luna an uncertain smile.

“What does it say, mate?” Ron asked curiously, looking up from his food.

“Ron!” Hermione hissed, scandalized, “that’s private.”

“It says, I like you quite a lot,” Luna said without looking up from her lunch.

Everyone went silent as Neville slowly reddened.

Luna straightened in her seat and looked around. “Was I not supposed to act like I knew?” she asked curiously.

“Usually not,” Hermione said. “Especially if you didn’t sign the note.”

Luna frowned, then reached over and plucked the note from Neville’s fingers, fished a quill out of her bag, and signed it with a flourish. She handed it back to Neville with a smile. “I haven’t done one of these before, so I wanted to make sure I did it correctly.”

Harry had to bite the inside of his mouth to keep from laughing out loud.

As they left the Great Hall, Ginny plucked at Harry’s elbow. He turned toward her and she nodded toward an empty classroom. Harry stopped to re-tie his shoe and let the others pass him. He was a little surprised it worked when the others turned the corner, but he supposed the whole Valentine’s Day furore had everyone off balance.



He straightened up and turned toward Ginny, following her into the classroom.

“First of all,” she began, “I appreciate what you did, but I did *not* send that valentine.”

Harry raised an eyebrow. During the short time they’d dated at Hogwarts, his future self and the other Ginny had laughed about that awful poem. Why did this Ginny feel the need to lie? He began to get a cold feeling in his stomach.

Ginny coughed. “Well, I did write the poem, but that was a long time ago, before we’d even exchanged letters, and I was having a particularly silly day, and...” She took a deep breath and appeared to calm herself. “I looked at that awful thing after I’d written it and decided it would never see the light of day. I most certainly did not send it to you with a dwarf to sing it!”

Harry put up his hands in a placating gesture as the light began to dawn. “I believe you,” he said quickly, “and I don’t think we need to look too far for suspects, do we?”

“Their pranking ban ran out over two weeks ago, didn’t it?” Ginny asked with a scowl. “What really irks me is that the only way they could have found that poem was by going through my room. That’s way out of bounds, even for them.”

Harry wasn’t about to question that pronouncement. “What do you say to a little payback?”

Ginny brightened at the prospect. “What did you have in mind?”

“I think I can lay my hands on a couple of their old essays,” Harry said. “They’re a bit sloppy about picking up after themselves when they get excited about something. We can get a tracing of their signatures and... well you know the old saying, ‘Turnabout is fair play,’ right?”

Ginny’s answering grin was definitely predatory.

The last round of valentines was delivered with the evening meal, to the vast relief of a good portion of the student body. Five young men

had been sent to the Hospital Wing that day. One was injured when he became a bit too vigorous in fending off one of the dwarfs. The other four were hexed by furious witches. No one really wanted the details on those.

One last dwarf approached the Slytherin table and rather nervously tapped on the shoulder of Melissa Bulstrode. The fifth year prefect was even larger and hairier than her sister Millicent, and many people stepped carefully around her. Rumour had it that a unicorn had gotten a little frisky during her care of magical creatures class last year and knocked her down. She promptly got up, dusted herself off, and decked the hapless beast, knocking it cold.

Melissa turned in her seat and scowled down at the dwarf, who quickly handed her two folded bits of parchment, then scuttled away. She read the notes, frowning, then got up from her seat. She stumped over to the Gryffindor table, causing several conversations to lapse as students began to look nervously at the imposing girl. She finally came to a stop behind Fred and George, who turned to look at her.

She gestured with the notes, eyeing them speculatively. "Both of you, huh? Not bad looking, but a bit weedy. Of course with two of you that might be less of an issue." She nodded. "All right then."

"Er, all right what?" Fred asked.

"I'm afraid you have us at a bit of a loss," George said carefully.

"I said," she grated, "all right to the next Hogsmeade weekend, and whatever happens... afterward."

Fred and George exchanged a single glance as her rather large hands descended toward their shoulders. An instant later, their bench was enveloped in a cloud of foul-smelling smoke as multiple dung-bombs detonated. By the time the smoke cleared, the doors to the entryway were already swinging shut.

And Melissa was only a couple of second behind them.

Ginny's smile was a little too vindictive to be considered angelic, but Harry didn't really care.

A week later, and Fred and George were regretting even having heard of Valentine's Day. Or poetry.

Melissa Bulstrode stalked them relentlessly. In the halls between classes, during meals, finally even out to Quidditch practice, they never knew when she would appear, and want to talk about 'Afterwards'. It wasn't that she wouldn't take 'no' for an answer, it was more like she refused to even hear the word.

Oliver had objected to her presence in the stands during practice, but as she rather loudly pointed out to him, Marcus Flint did not allow any girls to play on his precious team, no matter that she could beat him arm-wrestling, her left to his right. Besides, Gryffindor had already pounded the snot out of Marcus and his little crew of chauvinistic half-wits, so what damage could she possibly do?

Oliver Wood was a little non-plussed at being told such things, whether by a Slytherin or a woman, made no difference. Finally, Angelina pulled him aside for a brief conversation and Oliver decided to let it drop.

Of course, Fred and George opted for the most mature and level-headed way to handle the situation. When practice was over, they hid in the changing rooms and locked the door.

By this point, Harry was feeling a little guilty. Not so much for the twins as for their unwitting accomplice. With some trepidation, he approached the hulking girls sitting on the stands where she could observe the entrance to the changing rooms.

"Er, Melissa?"

"Yes?" she said in a surprisingly pleasant voice.

"I, er, I need to apologize." Harry said, stumbling over his words.

"Whatever for?" she asked.

“Well, we, I mean, I didn’t think you’d take that valentine so seriously,” he said. “We were getting back at them for a rather nasty joke they pulled, so...”

“I know,” Melissa said, nodding.

“What?” Harry asked, shocked.

“I know it was a prank,” she clarified, “but they *are* kind of cute, in an overly Gryffindorish way, and I figure they’d probably done something to deserve it. So I decided to have some fun with it.”

Harry let out a weak laugh.

“But you did use me, just a little, to get your revenge, so you owe me one,” she said with a smile.

Harry didn’t think she smiled that way very often, because it seemed to transform her entire face. On impulse, he stuck out his hand. “Agreed - friends?” he asked.

She laughed and shook his hand. “I’m sure Salazar is rolling over in his grave somewhere. But I may need to cash that favour in for my little sister. I don’t think Draco or his little band of sycophants really care about her, not from the way they talk about her when they think no one’s listening.”

The prefect got up and stretched, and Harry was reminded of just how large she really was.

“She won’t listen to me,” Melissa continued, “but I had the same problem when I was her age – people just wanted to use me as an enforcer. Fortunately, a Hufflepuff prefect, someone I knew had no ulterior motive, overheard them talking and clued me in.” She sighed. “That was the nicest thing anyone had ever done for me,” she said, and then cracked a rueful smile, “If he didn’t already have a boyfriend I would have jumped him on the spot.”

Despite himself, Harry felt his jaw drop open.

“You know Harry, for such a bright young wizard, you sure are easily flustered,” the hulking Slytherin girl observed.

A/N:

As discussed in my previous author notes, I am now working full time and my update pace has taken a serious hit. 50-55 hours a week I was spending on writing and editing are now being spent as a spreadsheet jockey and on my unpleasantly long commute.

Plot discussions and individual Q&A will be addressed on my yahoo group (viridiandreams, see my author profile for the link) A lot of interesting discussions are taking place there.

Thanks for reading!

-Matthew

## Chapter 26

“Do you think Sirius will need another blanket out there?” Molly asked.

“I’m sure he’ll be fine,” Arthur assured her. “Those warming charms were still going strong after dinner, and a stomach full of your chicken soup put him right to sleep.”

“I just don’t feel right, having him stay out there in that shed,” Molly fretted.

“Now dear, we all agreed that he needed to stay well away from the Floo in case someone comes to call. And with all the spells we’ve cast, the shed is almost as comfortable as our sitting room,” Arthur reminded his wife.

“I know Arthur, I just don’t feel right about it,” his wife muttered as she began brushing her hair.

Arthur Weasley sighed as he prepared for bed. If someone had told him a year ago that he’d soon be openly defying Albus Dumbledore, practicing obscure forms of magic, hiding the most wanted fugitive in the country, and taking in one of England’s most famous wizards as his ward, he’d have recommended a prolonged stay at St. Mungo’s.

It wasn’t that he’d suddenly decided to become some sort of middle-aged anarchist, either. He wearily rubbed at his slowly thinning thatch of red hair, wondering if it was worth it to walk back to the kitchen for a headache potion. Every decision he and Molly had made was reasonable and, more importantly, essential for them if they were to continue being the sort of people they wanted to be. They couldn’t learn about poor Harry’s situation and then stand back and do nothing. Not if they wanted their children to follow their example when they were older.

He smiled as he thought about his children. Their autumn term marks were even better than he’d hoped. Even Fred’s and George’s marks had picked up a bit, though he doubted they would ever take their education as seriously as their mother would wish.

But it was his youngest children who surprised him most these days, and that at a stage in his life where he'd thought he'd got this parenting thing down cold. He'd worried about Ron, just a bit. Arthur Weasley tried to be fair and even-handed with all of his children, but he could tell that his youngest son felt a bit put-upon. Ron seemed acutely aware of the accomplishments of his older brothers, and Arthur knew the boy was desperate to make his own mark.

The inevitable hand-me-downs that were part and parcel of being a member of a large family didn't help at all. Arthur didn't need Lucius Malfoy to remind him that, while important, his work at the Ministry didn't pay well. To their credit, none of his children ever complained - but they *knew*. And starting at Hogwarts, where many of their classmates were not shy about flaunting their wealth, usually drove this point home.

His sons each seemed to deal with it in different ways. Percy responded by focusing on his studies to such an extent that he earned better marks than most Ravenclaws. Fred and George, bless their souls, taught several of their classmates the wisdom of being discreet about their wealth. He'd never tell them directly, but he was proud of the cleverness that went into their various pranks, however much those pranks might perturb their mother. Money hadn't been nearly as tight when Bill and Charlie attended Hogwarts, but those boys also found their own ways to shine – Quidditch, Care of Magical Creatures, and mastering some of the most complicated and subtle Charms and Transfigurations.

But his two youngest - they didn't seem to have time to worry about being just another poor Weasley. Ron left for Hogwarts a nervous, slightly insecure young boy with a desire to find a way to stand out from his brothers and earn his own fame. With her last brother gone, he'd expected Ginny to be a bit lonely and depressed.

Instead of moping about the house, as he'd expected, his daughter spent an inordinate amount of time writing letters to a young wizard she'd met at King's Cross. He might have been a bit alarmed at this, but his wife said that he'd looked to be a nice young man, so he reserved his judgement. The fact that he was famous didn't seem to be an issue to him or anyone else, not with the way Molly described

his clothing or manners. Arthur Weasley was also honest enough to admit that he was predisposed to favour anything that kept his little girl happy, and he could see that the ongoing correspondence was doing just that. The boy's letters also seemed to pique Ginny's interest in household magic, which eased things between her and her mother as well.

The downside to his children's association with Harry Potter didn't become apparent until he returned home from a very late night working on Halloween. His wife was still awake, her agitation visible in her shaking hands, and he knew something was wrong. As she made him a cup of tea, she explained what had happened that night at Hogwarts. While he was horrified to hear their son had been involved in a battle with a troll, it was Ron's reactions afterward that really gave him pause for thought. Most of his sons were recklessly brave when put to the test, true Gryffindors at heart. But even after the fact, Ron was more concerned about his friend's injuries than the fact that he had just narrowly avoided being killed. He didn't say anything to his distraught wife, but that observation gave him a warm glow of pride that lasted most of a fortnight.

Looking back, he realised that his daughter had also become a little more confident in general, and was looking forward to starting at Hogwarts. He supposed this was due to the letters, and she was open enough with the contents, even reassuring them when Ron was less than forthcoming. But this occurred while she was still living at The Burrow, and he saw her every day. Molly had said with certainty that Ginny was smitten with the lad, but surely she was far too young for that – not that he'd mind something like that blossoming, but not for a number of years. She could certainly do far worse.

The return of his youngest son, after roughly nine months, was a bigger shock. In many ways, Ron had become more mature than Fred and George. Instead of revelling in his summer freedom, he worried about his best friend, Harry Potter. Instead of feuding with his siblings, Ron talked quietly about things that had gone on at Hogwarts. Instead of sleeping in, Ron was getting up early in the morning and going for a long run and exercising to stay fit. The change was jarring – Percy was driven, but Ron was becoming disciplined.



After about a week of this odd behaviour, on a Saturday afternoon, Arthur asked Ron to help him fit new “windshield whippers” onto the Anglia. Of course, this task was nothing more than an excuse to talk to his youngest son, alone.

“So,” he said, as they struggled to secure the pliable rubber into the metal clips, “you seem to have had a fairly eventful first year.”

Ron shrugged. “Not as eventful as some,” he said quietly.

“You wish you’d had a bit more adventure?” Arthur asked with a smile.

Ron was still looking down at the bonnet of the car. “Not really. Harry gets into all kinds of scrapes, but it doesn’t seem like much fun for him.”

“But he is pretty famous,” Arthur reminded his son. This new, pensive version of Ron was a curious thing.

“But he’s famous for what happened after his parents were murdered by - er, *Voldemort*,” his son said, his voice dropping to little more than a whisper. “And he’s *still* after Harry. Harry worries about it a lot, too. He doesn’t want people to know, but I can tell he doesn’t sleep well most nights.”

While he was disturbed by Ron’s worries for his friend, Arthur also felt a stirring of pride in his son’s character. “Sounds like you’re a good friend for him, Ron.”

Ron ducked his head down and fiddled some more with the blade clamps, but Arthur could see the tips of his ears turning red. “I just don’t want to let him down,” was all he said.

Thinking about that conversation, Arthur realised that a lot of the changes in Ron could also be attributed to Harry’s influence. The only serious disagreement he’d had with his children that summer was over whether Harry was all right staying with his Muggle relatives. He was ashamed to find out he’d been on the wrong side of that disagreement.

From his first meeting with Harry Potter, the boy had struck him as an 'old soul.' The healer had warned Molly that the boy was likely to have long-term psychological effects, but it was still disturbing to see how seriously he took everything. His stomach twisted when he remembered the look on the boy's face as he flinched back when Arthur tried to pat his shoulder.

But there was more going on than just an abusive home-life. At first Harry's desire to see The Burrow's security seemed to be rooted in simple fear. But after Bill took him aside and described some of the more - exotic - measures, Arthur began to wonder. The fact that Harry freely admitted he was keeping things back from them was a bit startling, but when he explained about the threat of Legilimency and their Potions professor, it began to make sense. That was why he and Molly practiced every night after he came home from work.

Arthur Weasley smiled wearily at his wife, who was just settling down in their bed. "Those exercises are harder than I thought they would be," he said, as he laid his head on the pillow.

"I can't believe our children are doing them in addition to their school work and all that play-boxing business," she said.

"They appear to be rather well motivated," he agreed. "This Professor Snape appears to be just as unpleasant as Bill and Charlie told us he was."

"I can't believe Professor Dumbledore would sanction his conduct," Molly said in an aggrieved voice. Their owl to Dumbledore had received a quick reply. While he was quick to reassure them that he had the situation under control, and that he would ask Professor Snape about these accusations, Arthur couldn't help but note that the headmaster never directly promised that he'd put a halt to the mental invasions. It appeared that Harry's speculations were proven correct.

"There may be some situation going on there that needs such extreme measures," Arthur allowed, "but I don't think *our* children are involved in such things. Not being able to scan their minds shouldn't cause any problems. And remember, Harry promised he will tell us everything as soon as we can keep that information fully to ourselves."

“But what if we think it’s something the headmaster needs to know, or even the Ministry?” Molly wondered aloud.

“I think Harry realises that’s possible. He trusts our judgement, Molly, and I think we should trust his, for now.” Arthur said with a smile. In truth, he’d come to think of the serious young man like a seventh son. The boy’s words at the Ministry custody hearing came back to him. Never mind what he’d done for the Wizarding world, the boy had earned at least a little trust.

OoOoO

Fortunately, after Valentine’s Day things settled down a bit for Harry and his friends. He was quietly grateful for this, as it gave him some breathing room to work on a few things.

He owed Rita Skeeter and suggested that she might want to take a close look at Gilderoy Lockhart and his ever so illustrious career. The discrepancies in his and Hermione’s timelines could possibly be explained away as ‘mistakes’ and ‘typographical errors’, but the man’s hesitancy in dealing with certain issues and questions in the classroom was far more damning. Harry was fairly confident that, given a few hints that something was amiss, Rita would inevitably dig up the dirt.

Rita responded the next day. She knew that Harry’s hints were just that, and she responded in her usual insinuating style. Once upon a time, her manner would have flustered him, but since they both knew what was going on, it now felt more like gentle teasing. Perhaps it was the tone of his initial letter to the witch, wherein he had not-so-subtly threatened to reveal her Animagus status. Perhaps it was the essentially transactional basis of their relationship. Whatever the reason, she treated him more like an adult than almost anyone else he’d interacted with since his future analogue had gifted him with some singularly unpleasant memories. Not that she ever cut “Mr. Potter” any breaks. And he still owed her an interview once he was on holiday, as she reminded him yet again. But it was bearable, and she could cause his enemies a lot more pain.

As February wound down, there was a pleasant surprise at breakfast. Flanked by what had to be her parents, Cho Chang entered the Great

Hall. A few people looked surprised when Cedric Diggory jumped to his feet and escorted her to the Ravenclaw table. He bowed to her parents, but ignored the hostile and curious looks coming from the students.

"I heard he's visited her several times at St. Mungo's," Hermione said sagely.

"Seems that rumour was accurate," Harry observed dryly. Watching the two of them, it seemed that relationship had received a bit of a jumpstart in comparison to the original timeline. It made sense though; whatever attracted them two years from now was probably already present. And Cedric visiting her in the hospital was a nice gesture – especially since Cho was smart enough to realise that he couldn't have had anything to do with the attack on her.

They would still make a handsome couple, Harry reflected. He knew that his disastrous 'relationship' with Cho had floundered as much from his miscues as hers. Neither of them had been great boyfriend/girlfriend material, but that didn't put either of them in the wrong. He sighed. Just one of a great many things that had gone wrong. He turned back to his food and noticed Ginny looking at him. He raised a questioning eyebrow at her, but she just shook her head and looked down at her plate. Harry couldn't help but notice that she was really only picking at her food.

As they split up to go to class, Harry wondered what he should do. He knew something was bothering her at times, but she didn't want to talk about it. He'd even considered asking Hermione, but didn't feel it would be fair to put her in the middle.

For that matter, Harry was a little conflicted as well. He'd begun feeling a little funny about his relationship with Ginny. At first, he'd merely acted to help her deal with the shyness and embarrassment that had marred her first years at Hogwarts, and left her vulnerable to the Diary's blandishments. With that accomplished, they'd also grown a lot closer. He still remembered how she helped him when he'd been so wound up after Pettigrew's capture. She wasn't the same Ginny he'd known before; the differences were subtle, but they were there nonetheless.

But the Harry *she* knew was a lie, a façade he'd created to deceive everyone around him. No matter what his motives were, he knew she wouldn't appreciate being lied to. He did warn her that there were things he'd had to keep secret, but there was no way she could anticipate the magnitude of those changes. Like his real age, whatever that was.

Harry himself had trouble sorting that one out. Immediately after the merger, he'd felt like he was Harry Potter, age thirty, stuck in the body of his younger self. He looked at Ginny and saw the reflection of his lost love, and vowed to make up what he owed her and make her happier in this timeline. But as time passed in an entirely new reality, Harry began to deal with and react to people who were different from what his older self remembered. *This* Ron seemed to have a better grasp of Harry's problems, and he seemed to have lost the envy that had marred the early years of their previous friendship. *This* Hermione seemed to feel more accepted by her peers; she was more secure in her friendships and her self image. With those changes, some of them his doing, some of them unforeseen, he supposed it was inevitable that the two of them grew closer faster than he remembered.

*This* new Harry was also closer to more people. Fred and George were more than just team mates... co-conspirators seemed a better term. Just being fostered by the Weasleys and no longer being subjected to the Dursleys was brilliant, in his mind. He'd also fumbled into a much closer relationship with his head of house, though he supposed some of that stemmed from his confidence that her stern exterior was just an act. He'd deliberately cultivated a closer friendship with Neville, starting even before the sorting, and that investment had yielded wonderful returns. His arrangements for Luna, at first intended merely to protect her from harassment, had likewise earned him a new friend, albeit a disturbingly insightful one.

Harry's mind wasn't really on his work as Professor Binns began droning on about another Goblin Rebellion. Sorting out his own identity was proving trickier than he thought possible. All these new relationships, all the work with his new, younger body - was he a thirty year old Harry Potter, getting used to newer versions of his friends? Or was he a twelve year old Harry Potter, slowly assimilating

the memories his older self died to send back as a warning of what could have been? Was it even important?

Maybe it was where Ginny was concerned. An adult Harry trying to rebuild his relationship with the younger doppelganger of his lost love was more than a little creepy. But was this Ginny even the same person? The old Ginny barely spoke to him until she was a fourth year student. This one was becoming his closest friend. For that matter, his older self was hardly experienced with boy-girl relationships. That particular section of his heart closed off forever after the Hogwarts Massacre. He still had Ron and Hermione, but a piece of his soul had been ripped from his body when he saw Ginny lying in the courtyard.

Harry inhaled and got a grip on himself before his magic began rattling desks. Boring as he was, Binns would not appreciate the interruption.

Perhaps the age disparity was less of an issue considering his older self never had another relationship after the age of sixteen. The fact that he was thinking 'older self' rather than 'I' was interesting as well.

Maybe the simplest course of action was to just let Ginny decide. He wouldn't let things progress until she knew the whole truth. With the way their Occlumency was improving, it wouldn't be long now. She deserved to be able to make an informed decision anyway, and knowing that he'd failed to keep his promises once before was only fair. If she hated him for his lies, or if the thought of him disgusted her, then his own internal debate was moot.

Harry supposed that he'd arrived at the best solution, but it didn't make him feel much better. He tried to focus on the lecture and take better notes, but his stomach ached as he found himself dreading that conversation even more.

After their last class, Harry decided that advancing his other plans would be a better way to occupy his time than pointless brooding. He stayed behind after Transfiguration class and asked Professor McGonagall if he could have a moment of her time.

It was completely true that Harry knew very little about his parents, and asking their head of house, who'd dealt with them for seven years as they grew up, seemed only logical. Professor McGonagall went very still when Harry made his hesitant request. Then her eyes softened and she told Harry to have a seat.

Minerva McGonagall spent the next two hours telling Harry stories about his parents that he'd never heard before. He was impressed by how well informed she seemed to be, as well as her memory for details. Harry suspected that, despite their troublemaking ways, Lily and the Marauders had been favourites of hers.

"But I think that story shall have to wait for another day, Harry," she finally said. "I still have these second year essays to mark, and I know you want me to have time to evaluate them properly," she continued, in a not unkindly tone.

Harry shrugged and gave a rueful smile. "I don't want you to have to rush. I've pretty much given up trying to beat Hermione on an essay.

She smiled primly. "It is true that Ms. Granger has an exceptionally well-organized writing style, though you tend to do better when required to think on your feet," she said.

"At least all that recklessness is good for something," Harry agreed, with just a hint of a smile. Then he looked thoughtful. "You mentioned that my mum was one of this Professor Slughorn's favourite students. Is he still alive? And do you think he'd be willing to write to me?"

Professor McGonagall's nostrils whitened a bit, but she gave no other hint as to her feelings. "Though he did not respond to my inquiries, the owl did take the letter, so I suspect he is still alive. Perhaps he would be willing to accept a letter from *you*."

Harry didn't have to question her emphasis on the last word. In addition to his fondness for Lily, the influence-monger lurking below the Slytherin's affable exterior would leap at the chance to make the acquaintance of the Boy Who Lived. "I think I'll do that," Harry said, the real purpose of the conversation accomplished. "Thank you for taking the time to tell me about them," he added, with real sincerity. He wondered why he'd never thought of asking Professor

McGonagall about his parents before. "Though I'm a little scared when I think about what you'll be able to tell our kids someday," he added with a smile.

OoOoO

Once Harry had a plausible reason for contacting Professor Emeritus Horace Slughorn, he wasted no time in contacting the man. Predictably, his owl was answered immediately, and he began an almost daily correspondence with the retired Potions teacher.

Harry never deluded himself about the round little man's motives. He was in it for himself just as much as Rita Skeeter was. But excessive self-interest was a lot easier for Harry to deal with than outright malevolence. All Harry had to do was make it worth Slughorn's while to secure him as an ally. But the man was still a Slytherin, and he'd be expecting to be taken advantage of. Better to bait the hook subtly, until Slughorn made the suggestion himself.

So he began to ask Slughorn about his mum, and happily learned more about a woman he barely remembered. At the same time, he made an offhand observation that people seemed to enjoy themselves a lot more in Potions back then. When Slughorn asked what he meant by that, Harry touched on the inter-house feuding and favouritism that was most prevalent in the Potions lab. Harry was careful never to say too much, and even recruited Hermione to read over the later ones, giving her a very abbreviated explanation of what he was trying to do, and glossing over why he seemed hopeful it would work.

Clearly intrigued by what appeared to be going on in his absence, Professor Slughorn slowly dragged the whole story out of Harry. When Harry explained that he hadn't pressed the formal complaint because of a lack of a qualified replacement, Slughorn responded that he'd had no idea things were so bad when he received McGonagall's owl, but that he'd be in contact with her directly.

Two days later, Professor McGonagall asked Harry to stay after class. Harry waved his friends off and said he'd catch up to them at dinner.



McGonagall had a tightly rolled scroll in one hand, and tapped it lightly against her palm. "I received an owl from Professor Slughorn today," she said. "I wonder what you had to do with this."

Harry shrugged. "When I owled him about my mum, he asked me how things were going at Hogwarts. I tried to be careful in what I said, but he was specifically interested in how his old class was being taught."

The stern-faced professor nodded. "I see that even a vague description of the situation could have led to this." She frowned, a concerned furrow appearing above her brow. "Mr. Potter, I want you to be very careful in how you deal with this man; Horace Slughorn has a very genial exterior, but he is also very adept at using people to get what he wants."

Harry nodded. "I sort of got that impression from him," he agreed. "But at least there seems to be some mutual benefit involved in these transactions. Lockhart wants me to sacrifice my studies so I can prop up his career."

"That's *Professor* Lockhart," McGonagall corrected him automatically.

"If you insist," Harry said in an agreeable tone, "though I have yet to see him teach anything."

The corner of his head of house's mouth twitched slightly at that, but she gave no other reaction. "It is important to follow the proper forms of address while he is still on staff... though that may not be for much longer. I've also received an owl from a Daily Prophet reporter who seems to be researching some sort of exposé on the man. I don't suppose you'd know anything about that, would you? Especially since this Skeeter woman also wrote that story about your godfather?"

Harry gave her the blandest smile he could muster. "I might have suggested a profitable subject for her to investigate. If what she discovers is true, isn't it better that the facts be discovered?"

That earned him an actual glare. "While I can understand your reasons for disliking the man, the fact remains that it is very difficult to find qualified individuals willing to apply for that position, especially

with the rumours about that ridiculous curse,” Professor McGonagall said.

“I happen to know of at least one qualified candidate who is applying for the position,” Harry replied, “a former student of yours and friend of my father’s.”

McGonagall gave him a measuring look. “Remus Lupin,” she concluded, but then let out a sigh. “I never thought I’d say this Mr. Potter, but your recent actions sound more like those of a Slytherin than a Gryffindor.”

If she’d been expecting an explosion from Harry, he was determined to disappoint her. “I suppose they might. After all, that was the Sorting Hat’s second choice for me,” he admitted, watching her eyes widen as he truly caught her off guard. “But with everything stacked up against me,” he continued, “I don’t think I really have the time to play fair. Lockhart isn’t teaching me anything useful for when I have to face Voldemort, and nobody else is learning how to defend themselves. Mr. Lupin will do a far better job of it, so if I can arrange for him to take that fraud’s place, why shouldn’t I?”

Professor McGonagall gave him a long look, and Harry resisted the urge to fidget. “Sometimes,” she finally said, “I forget how young you really are, Harry. You act far older than your years, though I suppose you can’t help it, with the burdens that have been placed upon your shoulders.”

“The prophecy?” Harry asked, trying to keep his voice as level as possible.

“Among other things, yes,” she said quietly. “I can’t say I completely understand the pressure that places upon you, but I will say that you need to consider your actions carefully. One’s character is best defined by one’s deeds, and I don’t want you to do things in a manner that would shame your parents, as well as your house.”

Harry ruthlessly quashed a surge of anger at her words. “I see that my candour was a mistake,” he said stiffly. “I should go now.”

Professor McGonagall's lips compressed even further. "Harry, you need to understand that -"

"No," Harry snapped. "*You* need to understand! He talked to me, remember? Before I forced him out of Quirrell's body. He's not gone though – he's going to figure out a way to come back, and when he does, he's going to kill you, me, and everyone in this school if *I* don't stop him!"

His head of house raised an eyebrow at his vehemence. "Mr. Potter, I assure you Professor Dumbledore and I will -"

"Professor Dumbledore *can't* stop Voldemort," Harry said, letting out a sigh. "Don't you see? That's what the prophecy means - *I* have to stop him. If you or Dumbledore meet him, the best you can do is a stalemate – provided he doesn't kill you."

The older woman regarded him for a long moment. "Then this Duelling Association of yours...?"

"He's threatened to kill my friends, everyone I care about," Harry said, his past and future memories mixing. "If he returns, he'll also have people who are still loyal to him. We have to be ready to deal with them as well."

"You mean the Death Eaters will return?" she asked sceptically.

"They never left, Professor," Harry said scornfully. "They just lied and bought their way out of Azkaban. Do you *honestly* think Lucius Malfoy did what he did only because of the *Imperius* curse?"

Minerva McGonagall didn't appear eager to answer that question. "I... understand your concerns, Mr. Potter," she finally said. "That being the case, I believe I will be making some additions to the DA curriculum, starting this weekend. I will also speak to some of the other professors about encouraging attendance."

"I appreciate that," Harry said, sincerely, feeling his sudden anger draining away, leaving him tired and tense.

OoOoO

As the Easter Holidays approached, Harry was once again faced with the choice of what subjects to take next year. Recalling all the problems he had setting up the Temporal Transit Field equations, Harry immediately signed up for Arithmancy and Ancient Runes. After giving it some careful thought, he didn't sign up for Care of Magical Creatures. He felt a little guilty he hadn't been able to spend as much time with Hagrid as he wanted, and he'd hoped he could stave off some of the problems that plagued the poor man in his classes. But students were normally limited to two electives.

Hermione, of course, was delighted that Harry wanted to take 'some really challenging courses' too. This made it a little easier for him to persuade her to *not* take everything as she had planned, reminding her that it might cut into her DA or martial arts time. He also hinted that he'd read that Arithmancy was really difficult, and that they needed to be ready to spend extra time on it.

As before, Neville had lots of conflicting advice delivered in letters from various relatives. He decided to just sign up for the same courses as Harry and Hermione with an audible sigh of relief.

As expected, Ron was planning to take Divination and Care of Magical Creatures because he heard they were the easiest. Discovering he would probably be alone in Divination made it a bit less attractive, but he wasn't sure he wanted to replace that class with both Arithmancy and Ancient Runes. While they were studying in the library, Hermione tried to persuade him, explaining how fascinating and interesting those classes were likely to be. This, of course, had nearly the opposite effect on Ron, who began to look quite intimidated by the implications of her enthusiasm. Hermione tried to reassure him that she'd help him, but it came out wrong and the red-headed boy got his back up about it.

Harry gave Hermione a quelling look and pulled Ron aside.

"I just said it sounded like a lot of extra work, I didn't say I wanted her to do all my homework for me," Ron growled.

"She didn't mean it like that, Ron," Harry soothed. "She just gets... well, awkward when she's enthusiastic about something. You know how she is."

“Why does she care so much about me taking those ruddy classes, anyway?” Ron demanded sourly.

“Maybe she prefers we all keep taking the same classes,” Harry whispered, glancing back over his shoulder. “Maybe she wants you to study with us, or rather with her – you know, to spend time together.”

Ron clamped his mouth shut, but his ears turned bright red. When Harry led him back to their table, Hermione gave him a questioning glance. Harry just shrugged at her.

“I suppose it couldn’t hurt to know what Bill is always nattering on about when he comes home for holiday,” Ron said affably.

Hermione’s answering smile made the poor boy’s ears go pink again.

OoOoO

The Duelling Association slowly gathered new members each week. A few came out of curiosity and a few came because they knew they weren’t getting much out of their Defence classes. Some older students came because they wanted to challenge Harry. Understanding that he needed to establish his *bona fides*, Harry obliged them – provided they were willing to duel with nothing more lethal than a stunner.

The martial arts had drastically improved Harry’s footwork, and thus his mobility. That alone made him a novelty for the older students, who couldn’t seem to hit a rapidly moving target. That, combined with Harry’s almost reflexive use of stunners, disarms, and shield charms made him practically unbeatable. It also won the DA a lot of converts.

Professor McGonagall also began taking Harry aside for an hour before each class to go over his lesson plans and show him any new charms or techniques she thought it might profit the DA to have included in the curriculum. Harry was careful not to pick up these ‘new’ spells too quickly, but occasionally she taught him something he hadn’t seen before.

Harry couldn’t suppress a smile when Cedric Diggory and Cho Chang appeared, hand in hand, right at the beginning of a DA session. He

welcomed them in and gave a quick explanation of the club's purpose. Cedric knew most of the spells they were covering, but during the drills he was a bit slow on his feet. Cho was agile and fairly hard to hit, evidently having fully recovered from her injuries the previous term, but her accuracy needed work. Harry ended up partnered with her when she was the odd one out for a sparring drill, and he actually had some trouble catching her with an *Expelliarmus*. She couldn't tag him at all, and they were both almost laughing out loud, as everyone else, who'd concluded their duels, were watching them duck and dodge. Finally, Harry nicked her upper arm, causing the wand to fly out of her hand.

After they broke for the night, the Ravenclaw girl lingered after most of the students had left. Harry was shifting the desks back to their normal places when she spoke.

"Harry, might I have a word?"

"Uh, sure, Cho," he replied, unsure what she wanted.

"Cedric told me about what you said to him," Cho said, moving slightly closer.

"That was very sweet, and it meant a lot to him. That means a lot to me, too." She quickly leaned forward, planting a kiss on his cheek.

Harry stood rooted in place as the ebony-haired girl smiled again at him and then spun and left the room. He finished re-arranging the room before he got his blush under control again. When he returned to the Gryffindor common room, Hermione told him that he just missed Ginny, who had gone to bed early complaining of a headache. Harry wondered if she'd been waiting for him in the hallway outside the classroom.

Ginny was quiet the next morning as well. Harry wondered if she'd seen him with Cho, but he didn't know how to ask without making things even more awkward.

OoOoO

The morning of the Gryffindor versus Hufflepuff match dawned soggy and rainy, not to mention unseasonably cold. Harry could have sworn it had been a sunny day in the previous timeline, but he supposed random factors could have altered the weather over nearly two years.

Whatever the reason, Harry wasn't looking forward to flying in that mess, and picked at his food. Hermione, of course, was urging him to eat a good breakfast to fortify himself against the chill rain.

"You lot might want to stay inside the castle," Harry said after a loud crash of thunder echoed from outside the Great Hall.

"Not likely," Ron said firmly. "Besides, Oliver would bounce us from the reserve team if he didn't think we could take a little rain."

Neville nodded at this. Under Fred and George's expert tutelage, he was actually becoming rather adept with a Beater's bat. Needless to say, Harry was surprised. Harry had no idea that once Neville mastered his fear of flying, the boy would have a talent for Quidditch.

"Professor Flitwick showed me a water-repelling charm," Hermione said. "We're going to cast it on a couple of sheets and see if it will keep us dry."

Harry sighed. He was hoping the others could avoid the nasty head cold he was sure to get. He remembered needing several pepper-up potions before he got over a bad one his second year, though his memories of that term were mostly occupied by that whole 'Heir of Slytherin' business. Ginny was frowning as well, which reminded him that she was also on the reserve team in this timeline. Harry decided to drop the subject before he dug himself in any deeper.

"It would be handy if you caught the Snitch quickly though," Ron added with a cheeky grin.

That proved to be much easier said than done. By the time Madam Hooch's whistle blew to start the match, the driving rain reduced the visibility to barely a handful of yards. Despite multiple warming charms, the freezing rain had Harry shivering so hard he could barely hold onto his broom.

Cedric immediately began running a systematic search pattern, evidently hoping to locate the Snitch quickly as well. Harry just concentrated on staying out of everyone's way. The Bludgers were hard to keep track of, but at least the Beaters couldn't launch them towards him as often.

The *Impervius* charm on his glasses was keeping up with the rain. But even with that, he could only scan a sixth of the pitch without moving. The Chasers on both teams had trouble scoring, frequently dropping the icy Quaffle.

The score was tied at forty each when Harry had to swerve to avoid a Bludger coming from an unexpected direction. Looking back the way it came, he saw Fred waving his bat and pointing down the field.

Following the direction of Fred's finger, Harry saw George hovering almost motionless in mid-air, his bat held loosely in his right hand. Harry started to head toward his team mate, wondering what the problem was, when the Snitch zoomed out from under the boy's broom.

Harry immediately accelerated his Nimbus to the best speed he could manage. Icy droplets seemed to drive into his cheeks like needles as the stands erupted with shouts. Everyone had seen the Snitch now, and Cedric was making for it as well. Fred sent a Bludger toward Cedric, but the boy just leaned farther forward on the shaft of his broom and the iron ball skimmed right over his back. Their brooms were evenly matched in the heavy rain, but Harry had started moving vital seconds before the older Hufflepuff Seeker.

Without a Bludger handy, George had to drop away from the Snitch. If he blocked or impeded Cedric in any way, he'd be called for a penalty, and Harry's capture could be negated. The winged ball moved slower than usual, and Harry wondered if it was having problems with the rain as well.

As both Seekers closed on it, the Snitch suddenly dropped into a steep dive. Harry tracked it smoothly as it veered towards the ground. His fingers closed around the cold metal ball a half-second before Cedric's, and Harry hauled back on his broomstick with his right hand.



Unfortunately, the sodden broom did not respond with its normal agility. The waterlogged bristles fishtailed on the pull-up, striking the surface of the pitch. Harry suddenly found himself catapulted off his broom and tumbling across the rain-swept pitch. He whacked against the base of the stands with a dull crack that sent a thunderbolt of pain shooting up his left leg.

Harry lay on his back, blinking up at the iron grey clouds, and trying not to yell at the agony throbbing from what he knew had to be a broken leg. He lifted his left hand again, hoping the Snitch hadn't escaped during the crash. A bent metal wing protruded from between two of his fingers, vibrating impotently.

An hour later Harry was warm, dry, and in considerably less pain as he left the Hospital Wing. No sooner had Madam Hooch's whistle blown than his friends were down on the pitch. Hermione levitated him while Ginny and Luna wrapped one of the waterproofed sheets around him. Ron and Neville joined the rest of the Quidditch team as they escorted his floating body to visit Madam Pomfrey. He was pretty sure he felt Ginny's hand on his shoulder for the entire trip. It was a nice feeling.

Fortunately, the school healer had Harry's broken leg mended in but a moment, with only a mild ache to remind him it even happened. Of course, once they were all in her clutches, she refused to let anyone leave the infirmary without taking at least one Pepper-Up potion. With the soaking everyone had received, Harry actually didn't think it was that bad an idea.

Nonetheless, it felt good to sit in the Gryffindor common room in front of a roaring fire to discuss the abbreviated game. Of course, there was one question in the forefront of Harry's mind.

"Fred," he asked, "did you mistake me for Cedric or something when you sent that Bludger after me?"

"Nothing of the sort, old man," Fred answered with a smile. "I just wanted to get your attention. I could see George had gone completely still and knew only one thing that could cause that... at least during a Quidditch match anyway." He added the last while smiling and

winking at Alicia Spinnet, who coloured slightly before taking another sip of butterbeer.

“Ahem,” George interjected, raising an eyebrow at his brother. “I felt something hit my broom, and then I heard a rustling and buzzing from behind me. But I also saw that Cedric was a bit closer to me, so I didn’t want to give anything away by yelling.”

Ron’s eyes went wide. “You mean the bloody Snitch ran into your broom?” he asked incredulously, ignoring the sharp look he got from Hermione.

“That it did, Ronniekins, that it did,” George answered. “Perhaps it was trying to get warm.”

“It felt like it was starting to ice up when I caught it,” Harry said. “I don’t think they are made for flying in sleet.”

“Neither are you,” Fred pointed out.

“True,” Harry agreed, laughing. The warm camaraderie with his housemates was a welcome balm after the chill weather outside. The small supply of hot butterbeer Fred and George seemed to have located didn’t hurt either. Everyone seemed to be having a good time, but Harry found his eyes drawn to Ginny. She was smiling, faintly, but the smile didn’t seem to reach her eyes.

Harry did his best to swallow his frustration. It wouldn’t be long before he could tell them everything, he reminded himself. He could only break through his friends’ Occlumency with a concerted effort over several minutes. Curiously, Snape’s reactions to this increasing resistance had not escalated as badly as he feared. The man treated them as abominably as usual, but he wasn’t showing signs of overwhelming frustration as he had before. This was both a relief and an additional cause of worry for Harry Potter. Did the head of Slytherin have another way of getting what he wanted?

Of course, this didn’t stop the man from abusing his power in the Potions classroom when the opportunity presented itself. The day before the re-scheduled Hufflepuff-Ravenclaw match, Draco jerked back from his cauldron with a startled oath. A puff of smoke burst out

of the half-completed potion, filling the room with a foul stench. Harry stared, a little surprised. The blond Slytherin rarely botched his brewing, especially something relatively simple like a preserving paste.

In moments, everyone was coughing, but Professor Snape dispersed the acrid fumes with a wave of his wand. By this time, Draco's face was scarlet with humiliation. "It's Potter's fault," he claimed in an aggrieved tone, "I saw him flick something into my cauldron out of the corner of my eye!"

"That's a lie!" Ron replied hotly, "He never -"

"Silence, Weasley," Professor Snape grated. "Thirty points from Gryffindor, Mr. Potter, and detention with me tomorrow."

Harry grabbed Ron's elbow before the furious boy could escalate things. Ron turned back toward him, but the muscles along his jaw were twitching.

"And your potion will be graded in place of Draco's," Snape continued. "These juvenile pranks need to come to a halt before you manage to release a lethal by-product," he sneered.

"As you wish, Professor," Harry said. As he turned away from his cauldron, his elbow jostled it hard enough to spill out the contents. He slowly turned back to regard the spreading puddle on the dungeon floor, along with the reddening face of the Potions Master. "Oops," he said, quietly.

"Don't bother to clean that up," Snape snapped, "you'll be spending the whole day tomorrow scrubbing and polishing the floors in here."

Harry deliberately locked eyes with the man, daring him to try and probe Harry's mind, but he didn't take the bait. The bell rang and everyone began decanting their potions for marking. Harry noticed the Slytherin students being particularly careless and messy, now that they knew Harry would be cleaning up their mess while they watched the Quidditch match.

Ron was furious by the time they reached the Great Hall for lunch. "I can't believe you let him get away with that, Harry!" he growled.

"To be honest, Ron, I'm more comfortable when he's being his usual nasty self," Harry said. "Then I'm not wondering what he's saving up for. Now, did any of you feel him try to push past your Occlumency?"

Everyone shook their heads. "He pretty much ignored me yesterday," Ginny added in a quiet voice. Luna just smiled at Neville.

"Good," Harry said. "I think he must notice it's getting harder and harder to read you lot. I've been anticipating some kind of confrontation with him about it, and it looks like he doesn't want any eavesdroppers."

"Harry," Hermione gasped, aghast at his words, "you need to talk to Professor McGonagall, or Professor Dumbledore, right away. There's no telling what he might do!"

Harry almost smiled at Hermione. Snape's frustrated words to her last year pretty much guaranteed she wouldn't be giving him the benefit of the doubt anymore, let alone nagging Harry to do so. "He can't hurt me, or do any lasting harm. He knows Dumbledore would have his head. For once, you-know-what is working in my favour." He tried to avoid mentioning the prophecy at mealtimes. It was too easy for someone to overhear, not to mention what it did to his appetite. "He probably just wants to make a lot of gruesome threats, and then try to force his way past my shields. If he does, I'll have a little surprise waiting for him, that's all."

Hermione and Ron tried to talk him into going to their head of house, but Harry knew it was just their word versus Snape's regarding Draco's failed potion. He'd rather save his complaints for when it would do some good, and not just make people think he whinged a lot. He'd been looking forward to watching Cho face off against Cedric, since the Ravenclaw girl was now restored to her position as Seeker, but he knew Ron and Oliver would give him a play-by-play account afterwards. After all, he'd be facing her at the end of the season.

Ginny was still withdrawn and quiet though. Harry wished he knew what he could say to her, but things were so tangled up now. Once their Occlumency was solid, then he'd see.

OoOoO

Harry entered the Potions dungeon that Saturday morning expecting a confrontation, but he was disappointed. Of course, that's not to say that Professor Snape wasn't his normally nasty self. When Ron and Neville lingered in the hallway outside, Snape threatened them with a detention with Filch to make them leave. But once they were alone, he barely acknowledged Harry's presence beyond indicating where the cleaning supplies were located. Then the lank-haired man returned to marking essays and muttering to himself. Harry opened the cupboard and retrieved a bucket and a couple of scrubbing brushes.

Partially-brewed potions, of course, still contained magically-reactive ingredients. This meant that most Wizarding cleaning procedures, such as spells and charms, could be very hazardous. One *Scourgify* could trigger a massive magical backlash if one was particularly unlucky. It was worse the more the residue was allowed to build up on a surface. The flagstones lining the floor of the Potions classroom didn't appear to have had a thorough cleansing since the previous summer. What this all added up to was that Harry had a lot of scrubbing to do.

Harry was tempted to hurry, in the hope that he'd complete the task in time to see the end of the match, but he knew Snape would keep him longer if he finished early, just to spite him. So he worked steadily, amused that years of cleaning for the Dursleys would prove so useful in a magical classroom.

Ironically, the caked-on grime was so thick in some places that it actually helped. Whole sections would break free from the stones in one piece, saving Harry the effort of scrubbing it away bit by bit. When he was nearly done, he stood up on his knees, knuckling the small of his back. The clock on the wall showed ten minutes past one, so the game had just started.

“You seem unusually adept at scrubbing floors, Potter,” Professor Snape sneered, but with a bit less venom than he usually displayed before an audience.

“I did this all the time for my aunt and uncle,” Harry replied with a shrug.

Snape blinked at that. “I’ve had enough of your presence. Put everything away and get out of my sight,” he said in a bored tone.

Harry just nodded, barely trusting his good fortune. Maybe Snape was coming down with something. He placed the cleaning supplies in the cupboard and left without another word.

The dungeons were silent as he strode down the dimly-lit corridors. Any Slytherins who might have been found near their common room were probably all at the game. Harry was half-way up the broad stairs that lead to the Entrance Hall when he heard a door creak open behind him. He was just starting to look back over his shoulder when a familiar voice called out “Stupefy!”

Harry felt his muscles lock into place as he tried to turn. Off-balance, he was helpless as he felt himself begin to fall backwards. The last thing he knew before the darkness descended was a very loud crack.

A/N:

Yes, it’s a cliffhanger. Second year is heating up a bit as the law of unintended consequences smacks Harry in the head. Or is that a broken neck?

In any event, I’d like to thank my betas, Runsamok, Kokopelli, and Malkin for their work in helping polish this up.

As stated before, my writing time is a bit curtailed. I’ve made a start on the next chapter of Team 8, but this one was flowing better – so I invest my time in whatever seems to be the most productive venue at the moment.

Questions, answers, speculation, and progress reports can be found on my Yahoo Group, Viridian Dreams. The direct URL may be found in my profile.

Enjoy and thanks for reading!

## Chapter 27

Harry slowly became aware. It was a very gradual process, hampered by the fact that he seemed to be floating in absolute darkness. Of course, 'floating' was his best guess, because he couldn't feel his body either.

He wondered if he was dead, and was mildly surprised by how little that thought seemed to upset him. He'd made a good effort, but perhaps Fate wasn't to be denied. She seemed determined to extract her due from the Wizarding world in general and Harry Potter in particular. Part of him wanted to rage against the unfairness of it all, but his emotions seemed to just drain away, leaving him a peaceful, but empty, husk.

Harry felt his awareness fade again, but then he was reminded of what roused him. There were voices, faint but discernable. He focussed on them as a drowning man might cling to a rope.

"Merlin, I can hardly stand to see him lying there like that," a male voice said quietly. Harry struggled to recognize it as his mind groped through a tangle of new and old memories.

*Neville?*

"He wouldn't be here if we'd been where we were supposed to be," another, slightly deeper, voice growled.

"Ron, you can't blame yourself. You didn't have any choice after Professor Snape made you leave," replied a very precise feminine voice.

"I haven't forgotten that, Hermione," Ron's voice snarled. "That greasy git set Harry up, I know it. He's hated him since the first day of classes, and now he's finally tried to kill him... and damn near succeeded."

"He looked very unhappy when I saw him bringing potions to Madam Pomfrey," another voice added tonelessly. "His face was very pale, and when she said she wasn't sure Harry would wake up, he looked quite ill."



“Luna!” Hermione gasped. “Don’t say that in front of him!”

“Why?” Luna’s voice asked. “If he can hear me, then he’s probably going to wake up anyway. If he can’t, then it doesn’t matter does it?”

Harry found that he didn’t really care that much. There was another voice that should have been there, but it was missing. A thread of anxiety began to pierce the peaceful shroud dragging him back into the darkness. Then it faded.

She’d been increasingly cold and distant since the New Year, so it shouldn’t surprise him if Ginny wasn’t there. Harry felt the almost comforting chill soak into his awareness, numbing it, urging him to rest again.

“Ron, you can stop looking daggers at Luna,” Neville said. “We’re all worried about Ginny too.”

*Ginny?*

“The entire staff is looking for her,” Hermione said quietly. “They’ll find her Ron. And then we’ll all get detention for not staying in the tower,” she fretted.

“I don’t care,” Ron snapped. “I told Percy someone might take advantage of this to go after Harry. If I knew who had my sister, I’d go after them, but I don’t. At least I can do something useful here.”

“I think Professor Dumbledore knows we are here,” Luna said quietly. “He was looking right at you two when the announcement was made.”

“*Her skeleton will lie in the Chamber forever,*” Hermione recited, not responding to Luna’s words. “What Chamber is that referring to?”

Harry felt fear twist inside him. How could this be happening again?

“I’m not sure, but I think it’s some sort of secret,” Neville said. “All the teachers are looking for it now.”

“But who would kidnap Ginny?” Ron asked, his voice getting rough.

“Professor McGonagall insisted on questioning the Slytherins,” Hermione said. “I heard that she and Professor Snape argued quite loudly about it in the Staff Room. But now Draco and all his friends are still confined to the Slytherin Dungeons, and she’s out looking with the rest of the staff.” She sniffed softly.

“Ginny hasn’t been herself lately,” Luna said suddenly.

“She has been awfully quiet, especially since Harry was hurt,” Neville agreed.

“I know,” Ron said miserably. “She was so worried about him. Madam Pomfrey kicked her out of here half a dozen times in the last month. But she didn’t really talk much. All she did was mope around and write in that bloody diary Harry got her.”

*Diary? NO!*

Harry felt his nonexistent body convulse with horror and then rage at his helplessness.

Then he heard a crash and tinkle of breaking glass.

The darkness exploded with blinding light as Harry Potter opened his eyes. He squinted as he painfully sat up and winced when Hermione let out a piercing scream. He felt hands grip his shoulders, steadying him.

Harry was released just as suddenly, but was still blinking and trying to get his eyes to focus. He almost flinched back when something touched his face, but recognized the smooth plastic. He held still as a red-headed blur slid his glasses onto his face.

That helped a lot, as he blinked, and finally reached under the lenses to wipe away some gunk that had accumulated while he was unconscious. With a little more blinking, the room was mostly in focus. He tried to speak, but all that came out was a dry croak. Harry looked over at the nightstand, but the top of it was covered with a tangle of broken glass, soaked in a multi-coloured mixture of liquids. He coughed and tried to swing his legs off the bed as Neville darted over to the infirmary’s sink.

Neville returned with a glass of water, earning a nod of thanks from Harry as the cool water soothed his dry throat. "Wand," he said to Ron as he held out his hand.

Ron pulled Harry's wand out of his robes, but Hermione looked on rather dubiously. "Harry," she said carefully, "shouldn't you be staying in bed? You were hurt rather badly. Madam Pomfrey said her salves would keep your muscles from deteriorating too much, but you fractured your skull and you've been in a coma for over a month..." Her voice trailed off when she met Harry's eyes.

Harry straightened his back, then looked down at the hospital pyjamas and grimaced. He shook the pillow out of its pillowcase and let both fall to the floor. He transfigured them into a pair of trainers and pulled them on over his bare feet. He stood up carefully, but everything seemed to be working more or less correctly. He was sore, but functional – though anxiety seemed to be gnawing at the pit of his stomach. "How long ago did Ginny disappear?" he asked, dreading the answer.

"Luna saw her about four hours ago, coming out of Charms," Ron said quickly.

Harry took a deep breath, all other things being equal, she was probably still alive. "I know where she is," he finally said, "and I'm going to get her."

"Not alone you aren't," Ron retorted.

Harry gave his oldest friend a weary smile that made the taller boy flinch back. "No, I don't suppose I am."

"How do you know where she is?" Hermione asked, clearly confused.

"It's a long story," Harry said as he quickly stood up. "How's your Occlumency?"

Hermione's eyes widened a bit, and Harry knew she was starting to fill in the gaps. "Let's move," he said, "we need to get to Ginny as quickly as possible." Harry led his friends out of the hospital wing, his legs steadying with every stride. The doors opened before Harry

could even reach for them, but he had more important things to think about right then.

Harry hoped that with the staff searching and the students confined to their dormitories, he'd be able to avoid encounters with the curious. Apparently, that wasn't to be. No sooner did they round the corner in the corridor leading to Madam Pomfrey's domain, than they encountered three adults.

Gilderoy Lockhart, resplendent in mauve robes with a matching tri-corner hat, was leading Rita Skeeter and her photographer, Bozo, towards the infirmary.

"Harry?" Lockhart gasped, stopping suddenly as he saw them.

"Ah, Mr. Potter, so good to see you awake again," Rita said, her eyes glittering. "Mr. Lockhart was good enough to escort us to see you. Many people are very concerned about you after your accident."

"Professor Lockhart," Hermione asked suddenly, "why aren't you helping search for Ginny?"

"Oh, er, um," Lockhart sputtered for a moment, "you see, I already had this appointment set up, and it would be rude to just..."

"Is there some problem?" Rita asked, and Harry thought he even detected a note of concern in her voice. He must have hit his head pretty hard.

"Nothing serious," Lockhart said quickly. "A silly little girl ran away and has everyone looking for her. I'm sure she'll be found soon, never you worry. Now Harry," he added in an avuncular tone, ignoring the murderous glare Ron was giving him, "I was just telling Rita what good friends we've become over the course of this year. Why don't the three of us all go back to my quarters and we can talk about what fun we've had?" he asked with an imploring look. "I'll even forget to mention your friends being out of bounds," he added.

"Sorry," Harry said coolly, "one of my friends is in danger and I don't have time to waste on useless frauds." He could see Rita's Quick Quotes Quill moving feverishly behind the Defence Professor.

Lockhart's eyes widened and he evidently heard the scratch of quill on parchment as well. He spun around with his wand in his hand. "*Obliviate!*" and Rita and Bozo were *both* slumping to the floor with glassy-looking eyes.

The overdressed charlatan whirled back toward the mostly stunned students, but Harry's wand was already out. The Boy Who Lived held it out sideways, clenched in a fist shaking with rage. "*Protego Maximus!*" he roared as Lockhart finished his spell.

A semi-translucent wall of light spread out from Harry's fist, expanding until it reached the floor, walls, and ceiling with a loud crunch. Beyond it, he could see Lockhart snapping his wand forward to erase their memories as well. This was one spell the man could perform with great skill, having never been caught once over the course of his entire career. If the bastard succeeded, Ginny's life would probably be extinguished before they even remembered she was in danger. Harry panicked and reinforced his shield with everything he could put into it. The stones around them groaned and a suit of armour flew to pieces.

There was a bright flash of light, visible even through the shield, and Lockhart was violently thrown backward. Harry held for a moment, and then let the shield drop. He stepped forward, but kept his wand on the professor the entire time. Gilderoy Lockhart lay perfectly still on the hard flagstones, his head turned to one side. His eyes were staring glassily into space, the only signs of life the slow rise and fall of his chest and a thin line of drool creeping down from the corner of his mouth.

"What did you do to him?" Ron asked quietly.

"I think I reflected back a memory charm strong enough to wipe all five of us at once," Harry said. "Hermione, now we know why he's never been caught before. He probably let someone else do the dirty work, Obliviated them, and then took all the credit."

But the bushy-haired witch wasn't paying much attention. She was staring at the floor. Where Harry's panic-driven shield had touched the millennia-old stones, a groove three inches wide and at least an

inch deep had been gouged. She looked up at Harry, her eyes wide. "What did you do?" she asked.

"I panicked and threw up the strongest shield charm I could think of," Harry replied truthfully. "We need to hurry, Ginny could be dying," he added in an agonized voice.

Hermione visibly gathered herself and nodded.

Harry took one last look at the mind-wiped professor. He wasn't even babbling as he remembered from before. Harry supposed it made sense. Rather than a back-fire from a broken wand, he'd evidently thrown a memory charm strong enough to affect five people, only to have it reflected back in his face. He suspected the man was catatonic now. *Fate can have him*, Harry decided as he set off down the corridor again. Rita and Bozo would be found soon enough.

There were no more encounters before they reached Moaning Myrtle's bathroom.

"You're not supposed to be in here!" the ghost wailed as soon as Harry pushed the door open.

"Sorry, it's an emergency," Hermione explained, though she was eyeing Harry rather oddly.

"Oh, you're looking for that *other* girl," Myrtle replied with a knowing smile.

Ron made a strangled noise but Hermione beat him to the punch. "You know where she is?" she asked, outraged, "and you didn't tell anyone?"

"If she doesn't make it, I'll make you wish the Bloody Baron was after you instead," Harry snarled, "Now get out of the way!"

Myrtle back away slowly, but Harry had enough. He quickly stepped forward, ignoring the biting chill as his shoulder passed through the ghost's body. Stopping in front of the marked taps, he hissed "Open!"

He turned back to his friends as the taps glowed and the sink descended into the floor. "Yes," he said, "I know I just spoke in Parseltongue. It was a little gift from Tom when I got this ruddy scar. That's how they kept this hidden for so long and why none of the staff could find it." He picked up a bar of soap from the next sink over and transfigured it into a long coil of rope, but he watched his friends out of the corner of his eye, gauging their reactions.

Hermione's eyes were dancing with questions, but she was visibly restraining herself. Ron nodded, but his eyes were worried. Neville just took a deep breath and helped tie the rope to the thick pipes below the working sink. Luna looked as though she'd been told the house elves were serving roast beef for supper – mildly interested, but not really surprised.

"This is going to be really dangerous: if any of you want to back out now, I'll not think ill of you," Harry said quietly once the rope was anchored. He wasn't sure Fawkes would come, since they hadn't been introduced yet, and he wasn't feeling overwhelmingly loyal to Dumbledore at the moment. Better to have another way back out of there.

"Harry! She's my sister!" Ron said, outraged. The others nodded.

"All right," Harry acquiesced. "But you need to do exactly what I say when we get down there. Agreed?" Another chorus of nods.

The inside of the pipe was just as foul and slimy as Harry remembered. It would have been better if they'd had their brooms, but any delays while the Diary was sucking away Ginny's life could be fatal. He had to stop that immediately. The pipe finally levelled out and deposited them on the floor of a damp tunnel. Hermione instantly had her wand out and illuminated the humid darkness.

Harry was on his feet in an instant. As they advanced, their feet began to crunch on rat skeletons. "There's a basilisk down here," he whispered, "so keep your eyes down. If it attacks, we use massed blind fire in its direction, physically damaging curses only, it's too big to stun. Just like one of our covering fire exercises, right?"

"A basilisk?" Neville gasped.

“Yes, and if you meet its gaze, it’ll kill you on the spot,” Harry said, turning toward the boy. “What part of ‘really dangerous’ did you not understand?”

Neville’s eyes flickered toward Luna and Harry noticed the girl’s eyes hardening behind her wire-rimmed spectacles. “We’re all here to save Ginny,” she said. “We’ll have time for long overdue conversations afterward.”

Harry nodded and led them to the end of the tunnel, a wall with two carved serpents. He hissed “Open,” again in Parseltongue, and the serpents parted, splitting the wall with them.

The five Gryffindors then entered the Chamber of Secrets.

The elaborately carved pillars, dim greenish illumination, and echoing footsteps all combined to creep Harry out just as much as last time. He knew what to expect, but that didn’t seem to matter to his racing heart. He was also dreading finding Ginny. He hoped she was still alive... no, she *had* to be. But he could be wrong. He wasn’t sure what another failure would mean, because his mind shied away from even admitting it was possible. His wand shook in his hand. All his hesitancy, all his doubts, seemed so stupid now.

Harry resisted the urge to break into a run. If things were repeating from last time, Ginny would be on the floor at the base of the statue, on the far side of the chamber. But they needed to stay together; otherwise the Basilisk might pick them off one by one. He must have been insane to let them come down here with him.

Nevertheless, when the statue swam out of the gloom, Ginny’s tiny form sprawled at its feet, Ron let out a sob and broke into a run. The rest of them picked up the pace as well, their footsteps echoing off the ancient stones. As Ron struggled to rouse his sister, Harry’s eyes flickered down to the Diary tucked under her hands. His stomach contracted into a small, icy ball, and his wand trembled in his hand as he looked around.

This time, Harry saw the hateful spectre materialize out of thin air. The tall, handsome dark-haired boy was slightly blurred around the edges, but his gloating smile was all too visible. Harry felt the blood



surge in his veins as rage threatened to overcome his reason. This bastard had hurt Ginny, *again*, and he'd let it happen, *again*.

"She won't wake, you know," the boy observed in a pleasant voice, making the others look up.

"Why not?" Ron demanded.

Tom ignored the question, merely shaking his head. "Is this the best Albus Dumbledore could do? A handful of children? Even if one of them *is* the famous Boy Who Lived."

"How do you know that?" Harry asked carefully. He never told the Diary that much about himself when he tested it.

"Oh, I know a great deal about many things now. Some of them, I got from her," he continued, nodding at Ginny's silent form. "But she was surprisingly resistant. It took over a month before I could take control, and even then she was strong enough that I knew I wouldn't be able to suppress her memories afterward." The boy frowned petulantly. "I was so hoping to have a bit of fun with her first. The daughter of the Mudblood-lover murdering Mudbloods when she's away at school, that would be a nice bit of irony, wouldn't it?"

Ron's wand was up in an instant, but the stunning spell merely passed through Tom's chest with no effect. Hermione gasped.

"You can't hurt me, you know," the older boy said with a superior smile.

"He's right," Harry agreed, "he's just a shade of a memory, generated by a Horcrux."

That cracked the shade's composure. "How...?"

"I know a great deal about many things," Harry said mockingly. "Like how a half-blood orphan grew up with so much hate that he threw away his humanity to become a madman bent on killing Mudbloods and Muggles like his father."

Naturally, Hermione put it all together first. "Voldemort?" she asked.

"This ponce is Voldemort?" Ron asked incredulously.

"This is a memory of him when he was Head Boy," Harry corrected, watching the spectre's edges become blurry as it struggled to control itself. He decided to twist the knife a bit further. "At least he's somewhat presentable. Later, he looked like something that escaped from one of Snape's preserving jars."

"That's pretty bad, Harry," Neville said with a shudder.

"Don't blame Harry," Luna added, patting Neville's shoulder comfortingly. "It's not his fault this silly boy wanted his outsides to look like his insides."

Harry struggled to keep his voice light. Part of him wanted to rage at Riddle and part of him was horrified to see Ginny in this place again. He ruthlessly suppressed both of them – he needed to stick to the very rough plan he'd made. "It's okay, Tom, you never seemed to have much imagination – but we all have our limitations. Don't worry everyone: he can't touch us, so let's concentrate on breaking his hold on Ginny and waking her up. Then Tom can go back to sleep."

"I may not be able to touch you," Tom grated, "but I know what can! *Speak to me Slytherin, Greatest of the Hogwarts Four!*" he continued in Parseltongue.

Everyone turned as the sound of grinding stones filled the chamber. The mouth of the massive statue opened, revealing a large dark hole. "Wands out!" Harry snapped. "Gather around Ginny, sight on that hole, and then look down. The Basilisk will come out of there, so don't look up until it's over." He purposefully placed himself in the gathering around Ginny so that he was closest to the statue.

His wand trembled in his hand as his ears strained to hear the first hiss. There was a thud as something huge struck the floor. "*Kill them!*" Tom commanded in Parseltongue.

"Fire!" Harry snapped. It felt odd, casting spells blindly, but he kept his eyes fixed on the floor. His first *Reducto* was apparently a lucky hit, because it was followed by an explosive hiss like a damaged boiler. He kept on with that, pushing his magic to do as much damage

as possible, hoping a hit would force the king of serpents back a pace or two. He needed to buy as much time as possible for them to kill the thing, otherwise what its fangs didn't bite, its sheer bulk would crush.

But from the sounds of shattering stone, they were apparently missing as much as they hit. The hissed exclamations from the basilisk seemed to draw closer and closer. Harry finally felt something rear up above him, and he could see a faint shadow stretching toward him in the gloom. He risked raising his eyes a little and in his peripheral vision he saw the giant snake's bright green underbelly, scarred and damaged from spells. It was rearing back to strike. Even if Harry dodged, it would probably crush Ginny.

Tom apparently realized that as well. "*Not her!*" he screamed in Parseltongue.

Before the snake could even register the command, Harry screamed "*Diffindo!*" aiming his wand at the exact centre of the cracked belly scales. The cutting charm punched through the snake's underside in a splash of dark blood. The lower section began to thrash wildly, while the upper portion toppled over to the side. Blood poured onto the stones from the massive rent, and Harry knew from its disorganized motions that the spine was severed.

He stepped to the side and glanced at Tom Riddle, who in turn stared incredulously at the dying basilisk. Harry couldn't help but note that his outline was even sharper than before. He then turned to his friends, relieved to see that they'd followed his instructions, and were in fact still looking down at the floor. "Grab Ginny and move back!" he said. Ron and Neville picked her up, while Hermione diverted the tide of ichor with a wave of her wand.

Harry let out a sigh of relief and started to follow them when he heard the nearby scrape of scales on stone. Acting on instinct, he threw himself to the side, but a stunning impact on his back sent him tumbling across the floor. He thudded against Neville, almost knocking him over. Winded and sore, he looked up without thinking, right into the eyes of the basilisk... which were already glazing over in death.

"It doesn't matter," Tom Riddle snarled defiantly. "She's almost gone now, and when she expires, I'll be completely here and then I can kill you all. Slowly."

Harry climbed shakily to his feet as Hermione worked on Ginny, first with *Finite Incantatem* and then an Awakening Charm, neither of which had any effect. He limped over to the dead basilisk's head, ignoring the gasps behind him. "Tom," he said slowly, "there's always a way to kill vermin. *Accio Diary!*" He winced as the Diary flew to his left hand. Adrenalin does funny things, and he hadn't realized he'd scraped it during his tumble.

The basilisk's mouth was slightly open as the muscles relaxed in death. Harry jammed the diary onto one of the sabre-like fangs, right through the bloody hand-print he'd left on the cover.

"No!" Tom's shade screamed, reaching out toward Harry, even as he doubled over.

"This makes five times now," Harry said softly. The spectre's eyes widened with shock and fear. Harry gave the bottom of the basilisk's jaw a roundhouse kick, snapping it shut and driving a pair of fangs into the book. Black ink poured out of the monster's mouth.

Tom's voice rose into an agonized shriek as he writhed and twisted into nothingness.

Harry let out a sigh and turned back to the basilisk. He carefully pried the jaws apart and retrieved the shredded diary. He limped wearily over to his friends, even as Ginny's eyes fluttered open. She sat up, coughing and confused, while the strength slowly bled out of Harry's legs.

"Harry?" she asked, sounding bewildered and a little scared.

That single word shattered Harry's control and he knelt on the stones next to this girl he'd nearly lost again. He didn't even remember picking her up, he just realized that he had his arms around her, his ear pressed against her chest, holding her as tightly as he could. The sound of her heartbeat calmed him, but he still found himself babbling. "Oh Ginny, I'm so sorry. This is my fault, this is all my fault. I screwed

it up again. You could have died again. I..." The feel of her arms wrapping tightly around his neck made him pause, and he inhaled convulsively.

Slowly, he became aware of what he was doing and loosened his arms. Ginny sat back down, but her hands lingered on his forearms. "You're awake," she said.

Harry nodded.

"That Diary *wasn't* from you, was it?" she asked.

Harry hesitated, but still nodded. "I had it locked up in my trunk. How did you get it?" He noticed Ron and Neville exchange a quick look.

"It came by owl post a couple of days after you were hurt. The paper inside said it was a gift you'd ordered for me." Her face coloured, losing some of its unnatural pallor. "I am such an idiot," she whispered.

"No more than me, maybe less, even," Harry disagreed. "You were tricked, that's all. And Voldemort's fooled a lot of people over the years."

"Voldemort?" Ginny gasped.

"Tom Riddle grew up to become Lord Voldemort," Harry explained. "He left a piece of his soul behind in that diary. That's one of the things that kept him alive after his curse rebounded on him."

"Harry?" Hermione asked hesitantly, "How do you know this?"

Harry let out a long sigh. Ginny's hand squeezed his forearm, helping him come to a decision. "Your Occlumency was almost there before I was attacked. How is it now?"

"I can't get through to anyone anymore," Hermione said. "But you should try as well to make sure," she added hesitantly.

Harry nodded and closed his eyes. He reached out and tested everyone's defences, but none of them yielded in the slightest, not

even Ginny. He supposed that was because she didn't trust him anymore, but he deserved no better.

He let go of Ginny completely and sat down. "Might as well make yourselves comfortable," he said, "this might take a while. At least we're in an appropriate place," he added.

"Speak for yourself, Harry," Ron said with a grimace.

"This place is called the Chamber of Secrets," Harry announced, "and if there is any place we won't be overheard, this is it."

"Until someone finds the rope, Harry," Neville reminded him.

"Right," Harry agreed. "Once there was a boy named Harry Potter. When he was eleven years old, he discovered he was a wizard, and he came to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry to 'learn the family business', as it were."

Everyone was giving him some strange looks, but Harry ignored them and forged ahead. "Things went well and Harry made some good friends. But then, at the end of his fourth year, Voldemort's minions captured Harry and used some of his blood to resurrect the Dark Lord. People began to die. Students, his godfather, Dumbledore... eventually the Wizarding world was consumed in one massive war."

Most of them were looking at Harry blankly, or in outright disbelief. Hermione, however, was frowning until she let out a little gasp. "We all died, didn't we?" she asked in a small voice.

Harry nodded slowly, not trusting his voice to respond. "In the end, Harry won, but it was awful. He found a way to send his... memories... back in time to his younger self. To stop it from happening again."

"But Harry!" Hermione objected, "that's taking an awful risk. Maybe he, or you, won't win this time."

"I don't see how it could have ended any worse, even if Voldemort won," Harry said tightly.

Ron's face had gone so pale that his freckles stood out like beacons. "All of us – we all died?" he repeated numbly.

"Harry?" Hermione asked carefully, "If it's possible to send memories back in time like that, why hasn't it been done before? Why didn't the Ministry use that to stop it from happening?"

"Well, one, because I came up with it, with Dumbledore's help, of course," he replied. "I never studied Arithmancy before then."

"I though you said he died?" Neville asked, shaking himself out of his stupor.

"His portrait," Harry clarified. "It was about the only thing to survive Hogwarts when it fell."

"Hogwarts fell?" Hermione gasped, but then caught herself with a visible effort. She fixed Harry with a piercing glare she must have learned from Professor McGonagall. "What else are you leaving out? Why are you the only person to send their memories back? Surely others would have helped."

Harry took a deep breath. He knew Hermione would drag out all the details, and he needed to stop hiding things if he wanted to ever have friends again. "You can't send anything physical back in time by this method – the best you can do is send back something carrying human memories. The easiest way to do that is to separate the soul from the body."

"You bloody killed yourself?" Ron demanded, outraged. Hermione and Neville looked ill, while Ginny just stared at him, her mouth hanging open. Luna merely nodded, looking thoughtful.

"Sort of," Harry admitted. "The future me arrived in the middle of my dreams one night after my eleventh birthday. He said he didn't have anything left to live for. Once we... merged... I could see what he meant."

"Those ruddy nightmares," Ron breathed.

Harry nodded. "Most of them are memories from my future self, replaying as I sleep. I think it was even worse for him. I'm slowly building up memories and experiences to counter those. The five of you are not exactly like the people he remembers, and that helps, in a way."

"We're different?" Hermione asked carefully, "In what ways?"

Harry braced himself. Better to just get it out in the open now and let them hate him. Better to not have it hanging over his head. "Well, first time around, we weren't immediately friends. I didn't really get to know Ginny, Neville, or Luna until my fifth year." Ginny's eyes snapped up to meet his and it was all he could do not to flinch away. "Luna, you were originally sorted into Ravenclaw, but you really hated it there because you were being harassed by the Ravenclaws. I asked the Sorting Hat to help. Ron I met on the train, but Hermione, you weren't really friends with Ron or me until after the Troll in the bathroom incident."

"That's how you bloody knew something was going to happen that day!" Ron exclaimed.

Harry nodded. "Quirrell released it to cover an attempt to steal the Stone. There was no reason to expect that not to happen again."

"And when you got him at the end of the year..." Neville continued.

"Yeah, I knew what he was up to. But instead of the three of us fighting through the obstacles the staff set up to protect the stone, I went alone and ambushed him as he was sneaking past Hagrid's three-headed dog. Fluffy did all the work. I'm sorry I lied to you all, but I couldn't explain without Snape finding out, and honestly I only needed to cast one stinging charm to do him in." Harry took another deep breath. "I also didn't want to risk any of you getting hurt," he admitted in a small voice.

As he expected, Ron's face was growing thunderous.

Hermione laid her hand on his arm and he visibly collected himself. "Harry," she said quietly, "you've been deceiving us since we first met, haven't you?"



Harry tried not to flinch as her words struck home. "I suppose I have," he admitted. "I knew some of what was going to happen, or rather, what might happen, and I acted on that knowledge. First time around we didn't study martial arts. We never really studied defence or duelling all that seriously until fifth year. I wanted you all to be ready, to be prepared for what's coming. I don't want to lose you all again," he concluded.

"But we're not even the same people, are we?" Ginny asked.

"Perhaps not," Harry said. "Maybe I've tried not to repeat mistakes I've made. Maybe I've tried to be a better friend, to be more understanding. Hermione needed someone to support her when she wanted us to take our studies seriously. I didn't before, and that was a mistake. If we'd known more magic, maybe we'd have survived longer. Ron, the first time through I was embarrassed about my problems, and I shut you out. And then I was stupid enough to feel betrayed when you didn't understand me or became jealous. Neville, Luna, I had no idea what great people you were until I grew up a little and got to know you both. I just didn't waste time with my second chance."

He looked at Ginny, and his tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth. He knew what he wanted to say, but it wouldn't be fair to lay it all on her right now. If she asked him directly though...

"What about me?" she asked.

"I ignored you for five years. If I thought of you at all, it was just as Ron's little sister; until the day you laid into me during your fourth year when I was being a spectacular prat. I made sure not to make those mistakes this time around."

Harry took a breath to continue, but realized that he'd run out of things to say. A lot of his arguments sounded like tedious self-justification anyway. "You're right, Hermione, you're right, I've been lying to you since the first day," he said, his voice becoming rough. Hot tears burned in his eyes as he realized this was turning into his worst-case scenario. "But what would you have done in my place? I don't expect you all to like it, but please keep doing the training, at least among yourselves, so you can stay –"

His words were cut off when Ginny slammed into him so hard he almost fell over backward. Her arms wrapped around his ribs, her face pressed up against his filthy hospital wing pyjamas. She was murmuring something that sounded like 'you stupid prat.' He felt a steadying hand on his left shoulder and looked up to see Luna. She knelt down and slid her arm around his back. Neville joined her, his arms going around Luna and Ginny. The Hermione was on his right, tears streaming down her face as she buried her face on his right shoulder. Ron joined them a moment later, gingerly wrapping his arms around Hermione and his sister.

*Maybe I am a bastard, Harry thought, maybe I've manipulated them as badly as Dumbledore ever manipulated me. Maybe I don't deserve their forgiveness.* But they didn't seem to care. They held onto him like they were afraid he'd be torn away from them. He realized the front of his filthy pyjama top was damp from Ginny's tears, and then he realized he was crying as well. *Wait a minute, I don't cry. I never have, not since... But I have them back, don't I? All the way back.* All of his friends were back and suddenly, he didn't care. He let out a sob and held them tighter. He was shaking like a leaf, but he didn't care.

OoOoO

Afterwards, Harry couldn't ever exactly recall how long they'd huddled together. He knew enough time had elapsed for the worst of his tremors to pass, as well as for his legs to grow sore from the hard stone. His breathing was back to normal when Ron gave a start.

"Do you think they've contacted Mum and Dad?" he asked.

Harry felt Ginny, who was still hugging him, stiffen. "I'm in so much trouble," she said in a muffled voice.

"No, you're not," Harry said firmly. "Older and wiser people than us have been tricked by Voldemort, including Professor Dumbledore's predecessor." The arms around him loosened as his friends stood up.

"Mum's going to kill me," Ginny insisted, looking up at him now. Her eyes were bright red from crying and her face was a dirty mess from the front of his pyjamas.

Harry smiled down at her. "Maybe, but only if she hugs you to death by accident," he allowed.

"We're still going to be in trouble for coming down here instead of staying in our common area," Hermione fretted.

Harry shrugged as Ginny stood up, weaving a little until Ron steadied her. "We'll just tell Professor Dumbledore 'we had a choice between doing what was right and what was easy'." His legs were so numb that Ron and Neville both had to help Harry to his feet.

"That sounds like a quote," Hermione remarked thoughtfully, "who said that?"

"He did," Harry replied, but then shook his head suddenly, "or rather, he will."

"That's going to get right confusing after a while," Ron observed with a smile. Neville chuckled.

Harry laughed out loud. He felt so relieved he was almost euphoric. Well, he had hit his head pretty hard, according to Hermione. "You should look at it from my perspective," he said with a smile.

"What does it look like from your end of time?" Luna asked suddenly.

Harry sobered a little, looking around. Hermione's light spell cast strange, flickering shadows across the pillars and the ancient statue. "Okay, I'll tell you anything you want to know, anything at all. But I think we should make sure we never discuss *certain things* where anyone else can hear. And I'll answer any questions you might have, but you may want to think about whether you really want to know the answers or not. I won't keep something back *for your own good*," Harry vowed, his eyes hardening as he spoke the last four words, "but there are some things you might not want to know right now."

Hermione looked thoughtful, and Harry thought her eyes might have flickered toward Ron for a moment.

Ron, however, had no hesitations. "Do the Cannons ever win the League Cup?" he asked quickly.

“Not even close,” Harry answered instantly. He’d been expecting that question.

“Damn...” Ron said in an anguished voice, “I see what you mean now about not wanting to know.”

“At least Quidditch games are sufficiently random that they don’t repeat exactly like before,” Harry reassured his friend.

“But Chudley will *a/ways* be awful,” Neville said with a smile, earning a glare from their number one fan.

“Anything else for right now?” Harry asked.

“I think,” Hermione said carefully, her eyes roving from person to person, “we should all think about this, a little, before we ask our questions. If Mr. and Mrs. Weasley know about Ginny, they are probably frantic by now – and maybe the professors know that we’re missing as well.”

Harry and the others nodded. “You’re right,” he said, “let’s get moving.” He could still feel the tension bleeding off as they walked, but his legs grew steadier. He could hardly believe they let him off the hook like that. They were better friends than he deserved. He felt someone’s eyes on him and turned to the left, only to see Luna shaking her head. He frowned at the girl, one eyebrow raised questioningly.

“You don’t seem to like yourself very much, do you?” she asked softly, her wire-frames glinting slightly in the light thrown off by Hermione’s *Lumos* spell.

Harry tripped, and barely caught himself before he fell. *You’d think I’d be used to this by now*, he thought wryly. “I’ve had to do some things I’m not very proud of,” he said quietly.

“But for good reasons?” she asked.

“The road to hell is paved with good intentions,” Harry said thickly. He didn’t turn around, but he could feel eyes on his back.

"I thought it went to *Bristol*," Luna said absently, "or was it Gloucester?" She frowned, pursing her lips. "Anyway," she continued, "how can we be angry with you, if you did it for us because you loved us?"

"Er..." Harry didn't really have an answer for that one. A set of tiny fingers wrapped around his right hand, and he felt a flush of shame. Ginny had just been through a horrendous experience, nearly dying, and now here she was trying to comfort him. Pathetic, that's what it was. "I'm fine," he said quickly, "I'm just a little disoriented, I think."

They accepted that, but Ginny didn't let go of his hand, so he wasn't sure she believed his explanation. Eager to change the subject, he came to a stop as soon as they passed the split wall that marked the edge of the Chamber. "*Close!*" he hissed in Parseltongue. The wall slid slowly shut behind them, until the carved snakes met in the middle again.

"Why did you seal it up again?" Neville asked.

"Because there's a dead Basilisk in there, probably the largest one seen this millennium. An apothecary will pay good money for just a bit of skin or some blood, so it's worth a fortune," Harry replied.

"But Harry, it's been living in the school all this time," Hermione protested.

"Yes, but we killed it," Harry reminded her. "You won't find many wizards willing to face one of those things, no matter what the reward." He felt Ginny's fingers tighten around his hand and he silently cursed his wagging tongue. He turned to the girl, who was looking horribly guilt-ridden. "It's not your fault," he reminded her. "That Diary was designed to do just what it did. You had no reason to suspect otherwise, and from what it said, you resisted it even harder this time... Tom knew he couldn't control you enough to suppress your memories of what happened. Now, what I want to know is how that ruddy book got out of my trunk."

"Er, Harry," Ron spoke up as they continued walking toward the pipe, "someone broke into your trunk the day you fell. When we got back from the match, we saw that before anyone told us you'd been hurt.

We thought you were still in detention at the time..." he frowned as his voice trailed off.

"I didn't fall, I was stunned from behind by Draco," Harry corrected, but he wondered.

He remembered going stiff as a board as the stunner knocked him out. Had someone else been there with a wand? That other spell practically guaranteed that he fell over backward instead of just slumping to the ground.

"I can't believe I was unconscious a whole month," he groaned

"Longer," Hermione corrected him. "Harry, you had a very bad skull fracture. Madam Pomfrey wasn't sure... she wasn't sure you'd make it," she continued in a tight voice.

Neville nodded, adding "She wanted to send you to Saint Mungo's once you were stabilized, but Professor Dumbledore wouldn't allow it. He said it wasn't safe."

"He may have been right about that," Harry replied slowly. He didn't fancy being in such an insecure location when he was helpless. At least if Professor Dumbledore was keeping him at Hogwarts for safety reasons, then he was probably also limiting who could get to him in the hospital wing. At least, he hoped that was the case. He noticed Ron was still looking a little queasy. "Is there more bad news?" he asked.

"Your cloak," Ron said quickly. "It was gone from your trunk. We thought that was why someone broke in, we had no idea about the diary..." the red-headed boy's voice trailed off.

Harry felt the muscles along his jaw tighten. That cloak was one of the few things he'd had of his father's. "Anything else missing?" he asked in a low voice.

Neville shook his head. "Not that we could tell," the round-faced boy replied.

Harry frowned. He'd need to make a thorough inventory when he had the chance. He wondered if the gun had been taken, or if the thief even recognized what it was. "Let's get up that pipe as quickly as we can," he said.

When they finally reached the large pipe leading up to Moaning Myrtle's bathroom, it didn't look very inviting. The slime and muck that coated the insides of the pipe made it far too slippery to climb. Regretting the absence of Fawkes even more, Harry suggested they cast lightening charms on themselves and try climbing the rope with their hands. With their weight reduced to less than a stone apiece, climbing hand over hand was indeed possible.

Harry urged them to hurry. He was fairly sure his transfigured rope would last a while, but it was better not to take any chances. Ron argued a bit about Harry going up last, but Harry insisted. Once his friend was a good way up the pipe, Harry cast one last nervous glance behind him at the tunnel and started up the rope.

He'd hoped he could steady himself with his feet as he climbed, letting them just slide along the slimy pipe. After the pipe narrowed a bit, Harry found himself dropping to his knees, grimacing as the cold slime soaked through the thin pyjamas and coated his skin. Despite the weight reducing charm, Harry's shoulders began to burn, and he was forcibly reminded that he'd been confined to a bed for more than a month. Harry found himself questioning if he'd be able to make it when he felt the rope moving on its own and he was pulled up the pipe even faster. In short order, he found himself sitting on the floor of the bathroom, rubbing the soreness out of his shoulders and thinking ruefully of how much his next sparring session was going to suck.

"Are you all right?" Ginny asked in a concerned voice.

Harry nodded. "A bit wobbly. I just need to get back into shape again, that's all." He looked up at her and tried to smile. It must not have been one of his better performances, because she still looked a bit dubious. Harry took a deep breath and climbed to his feet. He grimaced. Every one of them was smeared with slime, front as well as back now. "Cleaning charms all around?" he asked.

Hermione nodded quickly, pulling out her wand. “*Scourgify!*” she said, waving it at Ron. A section of his robes was suddenly slime-free. He promptly returned the favour, and soon all of them were casting at each other. In moments, they weren’t exactly clean, but they were somewhat presentable. Dripping slime on the floors would no doubt earn a detention with Filch, though as far as rule-breaking went, Harry knew that would have been the least of their offences that day.

Not wishing to delay the inevitable any longer, Harry led them out into the corridor. There was no sign of anyone, staff or students, so he led his friends directly to Dumbledore’s office. If the Headmaster hadn’t been sacked, as happened the first time around, then that’s where the search would probably be coordinated from. And if Harry was wrong, Fawkes might know where Dumbledore was.

The empty corridors seemed to echo rather ominously. Harry suppressed a shudder as memories of the ruined and blasted but equally silent halls of another Hogwarts from another time intruded. *This is not that place*, he reminded himself as a rising tide of despair threatened to engulf him, *and it never will be*. He found his eyes wandering over toward Ginny, and he felt his heart lighten. *She’s still here*, he reminded himself, *it’s not going to happen this time..*

The gargoyle was in place, guarding the door to the Headmaster’s office. Harry was about to start listing off all the Muggle sweets he knew when he had a sudden idea. “You can communicate with the Headmaster, right?” he asked the unmoving stone. “Let him know we are out here, and I bet he says to let us in.”

Ron and Neville both looked at Harry like he’d gone mad. But a moment later the gargoyle moved aside. Harry gave them a quick smirk, but as he rode the moving spiral staircase up into the office he braced himself.

“The Board of Governors had heard about this disappearance, and, combined with the unfortunate incident last month, they are a bit concerned about how the school is being run,” a smooth voice said. Harry recognized it as belonging to Lucius Malfoy, and found his fingers tightening around his wand. “Your flat refusal to send the boy to Saint Mungo’s has struck many as an ill-concealed desire to



maintain control over your little celebrity,” the man continued, “even if it should delay his recovery.”

“Now see here!” a voice interrupted, one Harry recognized as that of his legal guardian, Arthur Weasley, “Professor Dumbledore explained his reasons to our satisfaction. Harry’s getting the best care possible right here.”

“Ah, yes, and I am sure the Ministry will be fascinated when it is informed of your complicity in the Headmaster’s actions. There are many who believe the outcome of that hearing was wrongly decided, and are looking for any reason to re-address the issue.” The elder Malfoy’s voice dripped with malice.

Now at the top of the stairway, Harry opened the polished oak door and sauntered into the room. “You know, it’s truly heart warming to hear that *so many* people are concerned with my well-being,” he said in a casual drawl.

Seated near the fireplace were a distraught-looking Mr. and Mrs. Weasley. Professor McGonagall was standing near them. Professor Dumbledore was sitting at his desk, with Professor Snape beside him, while Lucius Malfoy stood in front of it, his face pale with ill-concealed anger. Dobby, wrapped in heavy bandages, cowered at his feet. With the addition of Harry and his friends, the room should have become a little crowded. There was still space, however, and Harry wondered if it automatically expanded to accommodate however many people had business with the Headmaster.

“Harry?” Mrs. Weasley gasped, then “Ginny!” she cried as her daughter entered the office. She was out of her chair in a flash, jostling Lucius Malfoy roughly aside as she swept both Harry and Ginny into a fierce hug. Arthur was just a step behind her and Ron was nearly strangled as well.

“But... how did you...?” Professor McGonagall, not one usually at a loss for words, was nearly speechless.

“That’s a very good question, isn’t it?” Snape observed in an insinuating tone.

"I daresay we might all be interested in that," Dumbledore said, "but perhaps we should first let Madam Pomfrey make sure their ordeals have done them no lasting harm." His twinkling eyes shifted toward Mr. Malfoy as he finished.

Harry understood the Headmaster's point, but the tale he'd constructed would work just as well on the former Death-Eaters. "I had some very interesting dreams while I was unconscious, after Mr. Malfoy's son attacked me," he said calmly.

"You dare accuse my son!" Lucius snapped angrily. "I'll have you expelled."

"I recognized his voice from when he cast the stunning spell," Harry replied calmly. Then his eyes narrowed. "From the back of course, as he's too cowardly to try it from the front." He decided not to mention the possible other spell, as it might muddy the waters.

"We've only your word for it," Snape observed coolly. "Draco has several friends who he was studying with at the time of the attack."

"It's interesting that you'd already checked his alibi," Arthur Weasley observed. His voice was even, but his ears and neck were a dangerous shade of red.

"Of course he would," Lucius replied, running a thumb over the head of his cane. Knowing about the hidden dagger, Harry knew the man was probably fantasizing about stabbing his nemesis. "It's obvious that someone like you would seek to take advantage of the situation after this clumsy boy managed to fall down the stairs."

"Mr. Potter was indeed struck by a stunning spell," McGonagall corrected him, "and it interfered with his treatment until we realized this and neutralized it. But what I'd like to know is the circumstances that prompted Mr. Potter to return to the dungeons."

"Return?" Harry asked, confused. "I was just leaving after my detention."

McGonagall and Dumbledore exchanged a quick glance. Harry turned toward Hermione. "Do you know what they're talking about?" he asked her.

Hermione nodded. "I was there when they questioned the Fat Lady. She said several hours after you left for your detention, you returned for a few minutes and then left again."

Harry shook his head. "That wasn't me. I never made it back to Gryffindor Tower."

Hermione's eyes widened as Harry's implications seemed to sink in. For that matter, Harry's brain seemed to be moving at a hundred miles an hour as he began to fill in the missing pieces. He looked up and locked eyes with Professor Dumbledore. Those blue orbs twinkled as hard as ever, but Harry didn't feel the distinctive touch of the man's Legilimency on his shields. Then quite deliberately, he looked off into the distance over Harry's left shoulder.

Harry turned, acting as though lost in thought, as Lucius Malfoy again threatened to have Arthur sacked for daring to accuse a Malfoy. There was no one standing to the right of the door. Not that he could see anyway.

Harry always wondered how Professor Dumbledore could see through invisibility cloaks. *It couldn't be that easy, could it?* He wondered. Then he reached out with his Legilimency and sensed a consciousness – *right there*, radiating equal portions of frustration and glee. An instant later his wand was up and he was casting a banishing charm.

He was rewarded with a thud and groan as *something* was slammed against the wall. Harry cut his eyes down toward the cowering Dobby and gave the house elf a quick wink and nodded toward a rippling motion in the air as *something* was pinned against the wall.

The air seemed to fold back on itself and suddenly Draco Malfoy's head appeared and the hood of a cloak slid down as he struggled. Dobby rushed to the boy's side, mincing from foot to foot and wringing his hands.

“Mr. Malfoy!” McGonagall exclaimed.

“You should learn to breathe a bit more quietly when you’re excited, Draco. I believe you have my property,” Harry snarled. He raised his wand until it was pointed directly at the boy’s face. “It’s a little harder to be brave when you aren’t stunning someone from behind, isn’t it? Now drop the cloak before I get creative.”

Thrashing and cursing, Draco managed to pull the cloak off and threw it to the floor... right on top of Dobby.

The house elf promptly disappeared under the cloak.

“So, thief,” Harry said scornfully. “I suppose you found some way to look like me to get access to my room. According to Hogwarts, A History, the doorway portraits can see through simple glamours. So that leaves what..?”

“Polyjuice potion,” Hermione blurted out.

Harry nodded slowly. “If you had it brewed already, you just had to cut off a bit of my hair and add it to the brew.”

“But Harry,” Hermione objected, “Polyjuice isn’t part of the regular Potions curriculum; it was just mentioned in passing, but I think the only book that has it is in the restricted section of the library.”

“One you should be quite familiar with,” Professor Snape observed in an acid tone.

“You’re right Hermione,” Harry said, slowly turning, “Draco had to have help to brew something that complex... not to mention the fact that someone had to tell him the password to get past the Fat Lady.” His eyes came to rest on Professor Snape, whose expression grew murderous.

Professor Dumbledore’s eyes lost a good bit of their twinkle as he turned toward his Potions master. “Severus?” he asked quietly.

Snape let out a sigh and visibly gathered himself. “Very well. Draco approached me about a matter of some concern to both of us. From

some... incidents... that occurred during the previous year, it was thought that Potter had somehow acquired an illicit means of moving around the grounds."

Harry wondered how much Snape knew about the events surrounding Norbert's evacuation. He'd even stunned and Obliviated the professor at one point to keep Hagrid's secret safe. He supposed Snape might have reconstructed his afternoon to a certain point, and then reasoned out the rest. On the other hand, smuggling Norbert to the roof would have been impossible without the cloak. Harry was sure Neville's memories had included them using it. So Snape probably knew Harry had it.

McGonagall's fingers were twitching at Snape's words, and Harry wondered what would have happened if she'd had a wand in her hand. Dumbledore's face was very grave, and he looked every one of his years at that moment. "Severus," he said slowly, "Harry's possession of the cloak was known to me. His father left it with me, and I passed it on to him. With the... circumstances... surrounding him, I felt that he would be safer if he had the means to move invisibly, or to escape if it came down to that."

Snape's face grew even paler as his features twisted into a mask of outrage. "You *knew* he had it?" he spat.

"Yes, Severus," Professor Dumbledore answered wearily, "and if you had shared your suspicions with me, this whole series of events could have been avoided."

Neville let out a small sigh, reminding Harry that he'd never told his friends that the cloak had been given to him by Professor Dumbledore. They'd probably been worried that he'd get in trouble for simply owning it, present or not.

Professor McGonagall peered at the visibly fidgeting Draco, and then back at her colleague. "He didn't tell you he found it, did he?" she asked with a wintry smile.

Snape drew himself up coldly. "No. He said he was unable to find anything incriminating when he searched Potter's trunk." His gaze

swept the room, his eyes narrowing when they reached Draco and his father.

"You talk as though this was just a room inspection," Molly half-shouted. "Harry almost *died* when that... that murderous little thug attacked him!"

"Draco was instructed to use a simple stunning spell," Snape corrected her coldly. "Potter would, at the most, have sustained a bruise or two, were he not clumsy enough to manage falling down the stairs as well."

"That happens when you get hit with a stunner when you're halfway up a flight of stairs," Harry explained, acerbically. "Funny how this whole plot was concocted with the sole aim of getting Draco into my trunk. The cloak, of course, was just a red herring."

"A what?" Ron whispered.

"The real objective," Harry continued, tossing the mangled diary onto the Headmaster's desk, "was this."

Harry watched Lucius Malfoy's face out of the corner of his eye, and was rewarded to see his eyes narrow in fury when they saw the sodden mass of paper. "Your old master *really* isn't going to be happy with you," Harry chided him.

"What is that?" Arthur Weasley asked curiously. Harry couldn't help but notice his right hand was hovering suspiciously close to his pocket.

"That's the diary Mr. Malfoy slipped into Ginny's cauldron when he ran into us at Flourish and Blotts. I was a little suspicious, so I took it out when I brought her books upstairs. It is, or rather, it *was* a diary that wrote back to you as you wrote in it, rather like an instant pen pal. I had a little talk with it after we arrived at Hogwarts and decided I didn't quite trust it. It claimed to be a former Hogwarts student, but it never would give me a straight answer about anything."

"Who did it claim to be?" Dumbledore asked in a subdued voice as he examined the torn pages, each as blank as the others.

“Tom Marvolo Riddle, that’s the ‘TMR’ on the cover. Funny how that’s an anagram of ‘I am Lord Voldemort’, isn’t it? After that, I decided to keep it under wraps until I’d sussed out a means of destroying it. It turned out to be fireproof, but basilisk venom seems to have done the trick.”

“*How* did you acquire basilisk venom?” Professor Snape snapped.

“From the basilisk, of course,” Harry replied blandly.

“Harry,” Professor Dumbledore said reprovingly.

“Yes, Professor,” Harry replied meekly. “The chamber contained a rather large basilisk. The, er, essence of Tom Riddle contained in the Diary was able to speak to it and ordered it to attack us. We ended up having to kill it.”

“How on earth did you manage to kill a basilisk?” Professor McGonagall demanded. “You should have died you the moment you saw it.”

“We knew approximately where it was coming from,” Harry answered, “so we kept our eyes down and blind-fired an awful lot of curses in its general direction. A sixty-foot snake is kind of hard to miss.” He noticed several of the adults flinch at his casual mention of the snake’s size, but there were other questions as well.

“But how did Ginny even get that Diary?” Molly asked.

“I got an owl,” Ginny said in a very small voice, “a couple of days after Harry... fell. It was carrying a package wrapped in paper and had a note that said Harry had ordered it for me from Flourish and Blotts. I was so worried, it was nice to have someone, er, something to talk to about... things,” she concluded miserably. “Today, I was writing about how worried I was and... suddenly everything went dark and I heard a voice say that if I was so concerned about Harry, it would send me to be with him. When I woke up again, I was on the floor, and everyone was around me and Harry was p-picking me up....” Her voice broke as she shuddered and Molly was hugging her again and smoothing the hair back off her forehead.

Harry wondered for a moment if it might have been better for her to go to the hospital wing, but then he realized that seeing the cause of her anguish confronted could be just as therapeutic.

"Were you disappointed to hear no news of attacks or strange happenings at Hogwarts?" Harry asked Lucius in a taunting voice. "Decided to get your son to see if he could get things back on track?"

"You can't prove any of these ridiculous accusations," Lucius said in a tight voice.

"I don't have to," Harry said lightly. "When your old master finds out what you did and how you failed, he'll do things to you I can't even imagine."

"You are a delusional child!" Lucius snarled. "I am not going to stand here and listen to any more of this drivel," he exclaimed. "I am leaving to make a full report to the Board regarding this insane asylum masquerading as an institution of learning."

"Mr. Malfoy," Dumbledore said as the man strode from the Headmaster's office. Seemingly in spite of himself, Lucius stopped a step short of the door. "Please take your son with you when you leave."

Draco's eyes bulged comically and Harry had to concentrate on keeping his face neutral. Ron didn't bother: he looked as if Christmas had come early this year.

"What is the meaning of this?" Lucius asked in a dangerous tone.

"Mr. Malfoy, your son has been implicated in the attempted murders of two fellow students," Professor McGonagall reminded him, in a voice as chill as the polar breeze, "Surely you do not think he could possibly be allowed to stay at Hogwarts?"

Harry's eyes sought out Snape, who for once was not defending his favourite student. Harry supposed being manipulated and lied to had silenced Draco Malfoy's strongest advocate on the Hogwarts staff.

"This is an outrage!" Lucius snarled.



"Yes, it is," Arthur agreed, surprising everyone. "He should be facing trial, not expulsion. Shall I call for the Aurors?" he asked the Headmaster in a firm voice.

"You have no proof to back up any of Potter's web of lies!" Lucius shot back. "Bring this to trial and my solicitor will make a mockery of you. Then I'll ruin all of you... those who aren't ruined already, that is."

"While Mr. Malfoy is correct in that most of this information has been revealed by Mr. Potter, I do have the means to confirm a good deal of it," the Headmaster explained, his eyes twinkling once again. Harry supposed he'd sifted through Draco's memories while they were talking, though it was hard to be sure when he'd done it. "It's unfortunate that this other evidence is not admissible in court, but it's more than sufficient to settle this matter to my satisfaction. You are both free to go, as long as young Mr. Malfoy vacates the grounds immediately. We will have his school things delivered to your estate." The old man's voice dropped in pitch and Harry saw a glimpse of the Dumbledore he'd seen at the Department of Mysteries.

Lucius had evidently seen it as well, for he dropped his hand onto Draco's shoulder. "Fine, we're leaving this disgrace of a school. Come, Dobby." He looked around. "Dobby? *Come!*"

The air beside Draco's feet twisted and Dobby slipped into view as he carefully folded the invisibility cloak that had covered him. He ran his thin fingers reverently over the shimmering fabric. "Got a cloak," he said, his tiny voice quavering with disbelief. "Young master dropped it, and Dobby caught it, and Dobby – Dobby is *free*."

Lucius stared at the smiling house elf, and then he spun toward Harry. "You've lost me my servant, boy!" he roared, reaching forward.

And stopped.

Because an inch from the end of his nose was the end of Harry's wand, rock steady even with his arm at full extension. Five other wands were out as well, as a handful of children silently threatened to hex him and his son if they made another move. Behind them, Harry

imagined the adults were reacting as well, but the immediate threat was already visible.

"You shall not harm Harry Potter!" Dobby said in a firm voice.

"You got that right," Ron said.

"You'll meet the same sticky end as your parents one day, Harry Potter," Lucius whispered, glaring down at the Boy Who Lived. "They were meddlesome fools as well."

"They died saving people they loved," Harry replied, his green eyes boring into the Death-Eater's cold grey orbs. "There are far worse ways to die. You're probably going to discover one or two."

"We'll see who dies well, boy," Lucius breathed, then spun on his heel and threw open the door.

Draco favoured them with one last dark look as he followed his father. "Be seeing you, Potter," he sneered.

"Only if your luck runs out, Draco," Harry said firmly.

The room was oddly quiet for a moment after the two left. Harry found his hand was shaking slightly as he lowered his wand. He jumped when he felt something tug on the leg of his pyjamas. He looked down and saw Dobby, holding the folded cloak.

"Mister Harry Potter, sir? Dobby hears that cloak belonged to Harry Potter's father. Dobby mustn't keep it," the tiny figure said, holding out the cloak.

"Thank you, Dobby. But will this affect your being free? I mean, you won't have to go back to the Malfoys, right?" Harry asked. He was pretty sure it was the symbolic act that was important, not retaining possession of the item of clothing, but he wanted to be sure.

"Oh no, sir. Dobby is free," the elf reassured him, holding out the folded cloak again. "But Dobby cannot believe that Harry Potter is so concerned about a lowly house elf."

“So, er, what do you plan to do now that you are free?” Harry asked, taking the shimmering fabric and tucking it under his arm.

“Dobby doesn’t know, Harry Potter, sir,” Dobby admitted. “Dobby didn’t think he would ever be free, even after Harry Potter said he would find a way. Dobby is very sorry Dobby doubted Harry Potter!” With an anguished look, the elf began wringing one of his floppy ears with both hands.

“Dobby! Stop that!” Harry snapped. “You’re a free elf; you don’t have to punish yourself anymore!”

“Dobby is sorry, Harry Potter, sir, but Dobby should have remembered that Harry Potter is a Great Wizard and Great Wizards do Great Things and even if freeing Dobby isn’t really a Great Thing, Harry Potter said he would do it and Dobby shouldn’t have doubted Harry Potter!” Dobby said, amazing Harry with his lung capacity.

“It’s okay Dobby,” Harry said, kneeling down so he was closer to eye level with the diminutive creature. “I wasn’t sure I’d get the chance, but I’m glad you were paying attention when the time came. Now, what do you like doing?”

“Dobby is a house elf, and house elves like to work. But Dobby isn’t liking being owned, Harry Potter sir. Being owned means maybe having a family like the Dark Bad Wizard Malfoys and not being able to get away!”

“I can understand that,” Harry agreed, “I wouldn’t want to be stuck with them either. Can a free elf work for wages?”

“Dobby doesn’t know, Harry Potter sir. Dobby hasn’t ever known a free elf. Would a wizarding family be willing to pay wages to a free house elf?” Dobby asked in a voice filled with wonder.

“I don’t know,” Harry said slowly, “but I know I would. If you can’t find a proper family to work for, come see me and we’ll work something out.”

“Harry Potter is too kind, sir. Dobby can’t impose on Harry Potter like that-“ Dobby objected, shaking his head violently.

"Yes, you can," Harry insisted, leaning forward and lowering his voice. "You came to warn me, at great personal risk. Even if I suspected some of it already, you still took the chance. I like having people around that I know I can count on. So will you at least think about it?"

Dobby nodded, too choked up to speak. He bowed very low, then snapped his fingers and disappeared.

Harry straightened up, to find Professor Dumbledore's eyes on him again, twinkling madly. "That was a very noble thing you did, Harry," the Headmaster said in an approving tone.

Harry shrugged. "The Chinese have a saying: When you save someone's life, you are responsible for what they do with it. I didn't free him from the Malfoys just to see him starve or have someone else take advantage of him."

"Well said, Mr. Potter," Professor McGonagall said with a nod. Professor Snape merely looked bored and irritated at the same time.

"Ah, I don't suppose," Professor Dumbledore said with a slight smile, "you'd have any idea what happened to poor Professor Lockhart, would you? We found him, quite unconscious, near the hospital wing, along with a reporter and a photographer, neither of whom had permission to be on the grounds."

Harry swallowed. "Er, I think they were invited by Professor Lockhart, based on some remarks he made. He was taking them to the infirmary to photograph me when we ran into them."

Molly inhaled sharply, and McGonagall's scowl was just as fierce.

"And how did he come to be in his current condition?" Dumbledore asked soberly, though Harry swore he saw a hint of a smile under that bloody beard of his.

"Well, he wanted us to abandon searching for Ginny so I could go back to his quarters with him and that reporter, and tell them what a brilliant teacher he is," Harry replied rolling his eyes. "I said that I didn't have time to waste on a complete fraud. He Obliviated Ms.

Skeeter and her photographer as soon as they heard it. He was about to do the same to us when I threw up a shield.”

Professor McGonagall frowned. “A shield created those marks on the stones? What shield charm did you use?” she asked.

“Um, Protego Maximus,” Harry answered. “I was in a bit of a panic, so I pushed it as hard as I could.”

“Mr. Potter!” Professor McGonagall exclaimed, “How on earth did you learn a NEWT-level defensive spell?”

“I read it in the seventh year Defence Against the Dark Arts textbook,” Harry replied truthfully. In the future, Hermione had insisted the three of them continue training and learning spells to aid them in their hunt for the remaining Horcruxes. “It’s not like those aren’t for sale to anyone with the galleons,” he added. “At the time, I just wanted to see what the most powerful shield I could cast would do. It worked pretty well today, but it reflected Professor Lockhart’s spell right back in his face when he cast it.”

“I see,” Professor Dumbledore murmured. “Well,” he continued in a louder voice, “Ms. Skeeter and her assistant are recovering nicely, though they don’t recall anything that happened since they entered Hogwarts today. Professor Lockhart was a bit harder hit, and he will probably require some time at St. Mungo’s before he recovers.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, sir,” Harry said with a straight face. He thought he heard Ron mutter something quite different beside him.

Dumbledore nodded slowly, the rosy late afternoon light from the window seeming to strike sparks in his silvery beard. “Well, you’ve had a long day Harry. All of you, actually... and you’ve done no small service to the school. I’ll be discussing the disposition of house points with your head of house. In the meantime, Arthur, Molly? Could you please escort these brave students to the fearsome hospital wing. I’ll alert Madam Pomfrey, as I expect she will want to have a few words with them. There will be time for us to talk more, later.”

Harry allowed himself to be hustled from the Headmaster’s office with a sigh of relief that almost set his knees to trembling. As he passed

through the door, he darted one last look back and saw Professor Snape, his features shadowed against the light from the window, the reddish glow making his skin appear even more sallow in contrast. His eyes were hooded, but the muscles along his jaw stood out in sharp relief.

OoOoO

Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were still a bit shaky as they led Harry and his friends to the hospital wing. Molly kept straightening Ginny's hair or brushing at her robes. Harry supposed she was just trying to reassure herself that her daughter was safe. He was a little surprised when she squeezed his shoulder as well.

"Harry, it's so good to see you back on your feet again," she said. "We were so worried, first with you hurt, and then Ginny disappearing, and now... we've got you both back." Her voice cracked a bit at the end, and Arthur wrapped an arm around her shoulder.

Harry glanced over at Ron, who was grinning at his parents. He supposed he should have expected this reaction from the elder Weasleys.

Madam Pomfrey, however, reacted exactly as Harry expected when they arrived. Ginny was immediately put to bed, while Harry and the others were checked. Harry, in particular, was closely examined. However, she did not order him back to bed, saying that he needed to continue moving around more than anything. She said he needed to counteract any muscle atrophy that occurred while he was unconscious. After a strict warning to report back if he had any headaches or blurred vision, Harry was pronounced conditionally free to return to the Gryffindor tower, after he changed out of the much-abused hospital pyjamas and into the clothes that had been brought down. Noting the traces of slime and muck on all of their clothing, she also required everyone who'd been down in the Chamber to drink a wide-spectrum cure-all potion, just in case.

Arthur escorted most of them to the Gryffindor common room, while Molly stayed in the infirmary to tuck her daughter in. No sooner did Hermione give the Fat Lady the password than an excited gabble of voices spilled over from behind the portrait. Fred and George were in

the front, along with Percy, who appeared both relieved and annoyed at the same time.

"Ginny's all right," Arthur reassured his sons. Percy let out a sigh, but Fred and George didn't appear too surprised, to Harry's jaundiced eye. The other students appeared relieved as well, and a shout went up when they saw Harry.

In spite of himself, Harry cringed a bit at the cheering that erupted, which made it easier for the twins to pull him aside. Fred explained that with the altered Quidditch schedule, Gryffindor was playing the last match against Ravenclaw in a week.

"And if you can play," George added, "that changes the complexion of the whole thing!"

"You know, Ginny could replace me at Seeker fairly easily," Harry admitted.

Fred shook his head. "She stopped attending practices after you were hurt. I think Oliver would have cut her from the reserves if Angelina hadn't threatened to brain him."

Harry frowned. *She must have already been affected by the Diary*, he mused. "Well, I'll see if I can get back in shape by then," he replied, "but I can't promise anything where Madam Pomfrey is concerned."

George waved that off. "We know you'll try as hard as you can. More importantly, *where did Ginny go?*" he asked in an urgent tone.

Fred gave his brother a rather annoyed look, but explained. "We, er, have a means of locating people who are in the castle, Harry. The exact mechanism isn't that important," he added quickly, "but we tried to locate Ginny with it, and it said she wasn't anywhere on the grounds. That meant she was either outside Hogwarts, or, er..."

"Dead," George added in a tense whisper. "When we saw you moving around, we were going to go and find you, but Percy was being a pain. While we were waiting for him to drop his guard, we saw you all enter a bathroom and then *disappear!*"

“Ignoring the question of why you lot were all in the ladies privy,” Fred added with a smirk, “We’re rather curious as to what happened. Especially since we saw all of you reappear in that same lav, only with Ginny this time!”

Harry knew they were talking about the Marauder’s Map. Come to think of it, it never occurred to him why they didn’t use it to locate Ginny the first time around, but this explained it. “There’s a secret chamber,” Harry explained in a low voice. “It’s not on any of the maps I’ve seen of Hogwarts Maybe whatever you are using couldn’t reach down there?” He knew for a fact that the Chamber of Secrets wasn’t on the Marauder’s Map, but he didn’t want to explain how he knew about that. Not right at this moment, anyway.

George nodded slowly, but Fred peered at Harry shrewdly. “There’s more you aren’t telling,” he said slowly.

Harry nodded. “This isn’t a good time or place,” he agreed. “How’s your Occlumency?” he asked.

“Getting there,” Fred replied. “Snape’s getting rather hacked off about it too.”

Harry smiled. “Well, when you’re all the way there, you’ll get the full story, yeah?”

George elbowed his brother. “We’re not getting any prezzies before we well and truly earn them, oh brother of mine!”

Ron was entertaining their housemates with a very general explanation of what happened.

“You had *dreams* about what was happening when you were knocked out?” Seamus Finnegan asked Harry incredulously.

“Sort of,” Harry said. “Not exactly, but it’s kind of hard to describe.”

“C’mon, mate,” Dean Thomas interrupted, nudging Seamus, “Harry’s *always* had weird dreams. I’m just glad you’re back on your feet!”

“I am too,” Harry agreed, warmed by his dorm-mate’s sincerity.



"Ginny's all right," Hermione reassured Lavender, Parvati, and several of the younger Gryffindor girls. "Madam Pomfrey just wanted to keep her overnight to be safe."

"But who kidnapped her?" Colin demanded, looking uncharacteristically angry.

"Voldemort," Luna answered, in the offhand manner that occasionally drove her friends barking mad. Of course, the room immediately went deadly silent, except for a few horrified gasps.

Harry reluctantly spoke up. Better to address this now than let the rumour mill run wild. "Someone sent Ginny a book when I was unconscious, claiming I'd ordered it for her. It contained memories from when Voldemort was a student at Hogwarts named Tom Riddle. Over time, those memories were able to take control of her body and then take her somewhere isolated so it could kill her in order to steal her life. She fought it a lot harder than it expected, and she held on long enough for us to get to her and destroy it," Harry said in a flat voice. Then he took a deep breath and his eyes hardened, "I don't want this bandied about with the other houses, and I don't want anyone badgering Ginny about it when Madam Pomfrey releases her. She's had a rough time of it, and anyone making things harder for her will answer to me."

"And after that, Fred and I will do things to them that Harry's too nice to think of," George added.

"If anyone has any questions about what happened," Percy said in a loud voice, "they are to direct them to myself or Professor McGonagall. Is that understood?" The scowl on the prefect's face was uncharacteristically fierce, and Harry silently commended the older boy. Ron stared at Percy, clearly surprised, while Arthur smiled at his often-prickly son.

Eventually, everyone settled down and drifted back to their rooms to get ready for dinner. Percy announced that the curfew would be lifted soon and the Great Hall opened for the evening meal. After a final word with Harry and each of his sons, Arthur left to be with his wife and daughter in the hospital wing.

By the time they filed into the Great Hall for dinner, the nervous energy that had sustained Harry since he awoke in the hospital wing was exhausted. And so was he. Harry found he could barely summon up the energy to chew his steak and kidney pie, and he was actually beginning to doze in his seat between dinner and pudding when Professor Dumbledore announced that Gryffindor had been awarded two hundred points for the incidents that occurred earlier that day – after a good bit had been deducted for being out of bounds, leaving the hospital wing without being formally discharged, and a host of minor offences.

Harry was a little dazed at this news; he hadn't thought they'd break even, after the punishments had been assessed. The more distant relationship he'd been establishing with this Dumbledore couldn't have helped, either. But if Harry was shocked by that news, it was nothing compared to what came next.

"I also have the sad duty to report that Professor Snape is leaving Hogwarts to pursue opportunities abroad. While he will be sorely missed, Professor Sinistra will be temporarily serving as head of the Slytherin House, while I myself will attempt to take his place in the Potions lab. Fortunately, as it is only two weeks until exams, that should not unduly affect the OWL and NEWT preparations," Dumbledore announced.

The Headmaster seemed somewhat taken aback by the reaction to this news. The Slytherin table, of course, seemed somewhat shocked and upset. The other three tables, however, erupted into a standing ovation. Soon students were standing on their seats and cheering at the tops of their lungs. Professor Dumbledore looked around, somewhat bemused, but Harry noticed him darting a quick glance in Professor McGonagall's direction, who responded with what could only be described as a smug "I told you so" expression.

As the applause continued for several minutes, with no sign of diminishing, the Slytherin students began to mutter and exchange dark looks. Fortunately, Professor Dumbledore raised his hands for silence before things got out of hand. "I'm pleased to note how excited Professor Snape's students are that he will have a chance to devote his talents to new research opportunities. I'm sure we will hear

great things from him in the future,” he concluded with a perfectly straight face. His act seemed to confuse the Slytherins and defuse a potentially nasty situation.

“Where is Draco?” a voice called out from the Slytherin table, one that sounded like Pansy Parkinson.

“I would ask you to direct any further questions about this or any other events to your heads of house,” Dumbledore announced, and with a wave of his hands, the dinner dishes were replaced with a rather elaborate selection of desserts. Harry supposed it was simply good tactics to immediately distract the students with large amounts of sugar, but he could barely pick at his treacle tart.

Ron, on the other hand, appeared to be having the best day of his life. The red-headed boy was exerting a visible effort to keep himself from crowing over the dismissal of his most hated professor. Finally, he could bite his tongue no longer. “I can’t believe they actually sacked him!” he whispered to Harry. “You’re going to be a hero when people find out!”

“Let’s keep that to ourselves,” Harry cautioned him in a similarly low voice. “I’d rather not have the entire Slytherin house out for my blood.”

“Don’t they already hate you? And us?” Ron asked.

Harry shook his head. “The upper forms, not so much, which is a good thing. And with Draco gone, some of the younger ones might mellow as well.”

“I think you’re being too optimistic,” Neville muttered, leaning forward across the remains of his custard.

“It means fewer people I’ll have to kill later on,” Harry said with a sigh. “So I hope not.”

Ron swallowed and made a face. “Sorry, Harry, you’re right.”

Harry gave Ron a crooked smile. “I might not be above a little private gloating among friends though,” he admitted.

Ron chuckled as he took another bite of his pie. He began coughing and choking until Hermione handed him a glass of water. Harry thumped his friend's back until he swallowed and took a deep breath.

"Thanks, mate." Ron said hoarsely, "Don't want to kick it before I can attend my first Snape-less Potions class!"

The rest of them laughed a bit, but Hermione just rolled her eyes. "Honestly, Ron!" she said, but her voice sounded more amused than annoyed.

By the time they returned to their dormitories, Harry could barely stand. He checked the damaged trunk, and let out a heartfelt sigh of relief. The Glock was still where he'd left it, under some of his first year books, wrapped in one of Vernon's old socks. After re-packing it, Harry collapsed onto his bed, still half-dressed, and pulled the curtains shut. Sleep overcame him with the drone of conversation still filling his ears.

OoOoO

Ginny hated the hospital at Hogwarts – it wasn't anything against Madam Pomfrey or her establishment – she had similar feelings about St. Mungo's, or any other hospital. Throughout the year she'd done her best to avoid it. She'd been there in the Autumn to repair a bad scrape from a sparring mishap with Hermione, and after the Christmas holidays to borrow some emergency supplies when her monthly visitor caught her unawares, but she'd avoided an overnight stay. But after being near death in the Chamber of Secrets, she had an impressive collection of scrapes and bruises, meriting what she dreaded the most: an overnight stay "for observation", after her mum finished fussing over her. She hated the scratchy sheets on the beds, she hated the potions and she hated the smells of disinfectant and poultices and brewing potions, but most of all she hated the fact that she wasn't free to go until Madam Pomfrey released her. She'd tried to sneak out in the first light of morning, but the doors wouldn't open, and her wand was presumably locked up somewhere else for safe keeping. She briefly considered picking the locks, since Fred and George had taught her how while Harry was at St. Mungo's the previous summer, but she didn't have anything shaped remotely like

a lock pick, and nothing in the hospital wing looked promising. So she waited, and fumed, and fidgeted, and fell into a fitful sleep as she leaned back on her bed, waiting for Madam Pomfrey to perform her Saturday morning rounds.

“Good morning, Miss Weasley, how are we feeling today?” Madam Pomfrey asked, nodding her head in a way that made the tip of her Medi-witch’s cap jiggle.

“I don’t know how we are feeling, but *I’m* feeling ready to get out of here,” Ginny replied, trying to put on a pleasant smile. She wasn’t sure if she was succeeding or not.

“Well, we’ll see,” Madam Pomfrey replied noncommittally, humming under her breath as she ran a number of tests, stopping every so often to write some notes into a mercifully thin medical file. When she was done, she nodded her head and walked away with said file, returning in a trice with a basket containing fresh clothes – fetched by one of the Prefects, no doubt. Lying on top of the small pile of clothes was her wand. “You’re free to go, Miss Weasley. Do try to stay out of here between now and the end-of-term feast, hmm?” she said, breaking into a smile at last.

“Yes, Madam Pomfrey,” Ginny replied, stripping off her pyjamas, never so glad in her life to see her camisole and pants. Supposing that the toothbrush on the nightstand was intended for her use, she finished her morning ablutions, promising her hair a good brushing when she got back to her room, but deciding that that level of hygiene would wait.

She needed to find Harry.

Harry, however, was not to be found. Although she thought she knew the most likely places (Harry was, after all, a creature of habit) she kept drawing a blank. For once, she wished it was not a Saturday, because she at least knew his class timetable. She stayed in the Great Hall long enough to chew through a hastily assembled bacon, egg and tomato sandwich on toast, while she formulated her search. Without looking desperate, she asked everyone she thought might have a clue if they’d seen her rescuer, but those students who weren’t shying away from her confessed that they, too, hadn’t seen

Harry that morning. She considered going back to her room for a good cry, more out of frustration than anything else, when she ran into Luna.

“You’re looking for Harry, aren’t you?” Luna asked, in a rather direct manner.

“Do you know where he is?” Ginny asked eagerly.

Luna looked thoughtful for a moment and then shook her head. “No, but if I was Harry, I’d go somewhere where I thought no-one would find me while I wondered whether or not any of my friends still liked me,” she said, looking out the window at nothing at all.

“But we all said that it didn’t make a difference, now that we knew the truth!” Ginny exclaimed.

“Maybe he wants to hear it again, personally,” Luna replied. “That, or perhaps he accidentally inhaled a Bibbering Gimple-chock. It produces much the same behaviour according to my dad – he wrote an article about it last year in the double-length August edition.”

“So where would he be?” Ginny asked, not wanting to get into any discussions involving animals mentioned in the Quibbler.

“Oh, the Owlery’s a good place,” Luna suggested.

“Been there.”

“Then that leaves the Quidditch pitch, or the bridge overlooking the lake,” Luna said conclusively.

“Thanks, Luna, you’re a life-saver,” Ginny gushed, running towards the door closest to the pitch.

OoOoO

Harry was mildly surprised that he awoke with no nightmares. He was shocked when he stuck his head out of the bed-curtains and saw the sun already lightening the sky beyond his window. He tried to process the idea of getting nearly twelve hours of uninterrupted sleep while he

composed his to-do list for the day. *If yesterday was a Friday, then this had to be Saturday, right?*

And then the events of the previous day caught up with him and his eyes snapped open. His stomach clenched at the thought of Ginny in the Chamber of Secrets again, despite his best efforts to prevent it. Was Fate that adamant about having her way? He and Ron didn't use Polyjuice to infiltrate the Slytherins, so instead Draco used it to infiltrate Gryffindor. Was that just a coincidence as well? Was there any such thing as a coincidence anymore?

Harry ground his teeth in frustration. Then he remembered what happened immediately afterward. He'd actually told them... everything. And they'd understood – or at least said they did – and forgiven him. He was still having trouble getting his mind around that. The one he expected to be the angriest was Ginny, but she'd been the first to reassure him. He still had a mild bruise from where her hands had been when she squeezed him.

*But she didn't really know, did she?* Harry asked himself. He levered himself off the bed, his sore muscles protesting, and lurched toward the showers. The hot water soothed his muscles, but not his doubts. After drying off, he looked out the window at the morning sky and dressed for flying.

Skiping breakfast, Harry slipped out of the castle with no one the wiser, and was soon back in the air – one of the few places he really felt comfortable anymore. His stay in the hospital wing had indeed left him rusty, so he began slowly, gently circling the pitch. After a while, he began to work the kinks out and began to fly a bit less conservatively. In seemingly no time, he was tearing up and down the pitch, diving and rolling, and engaged in aerobatics designed to give a bat indigestion.

Still, as good as the flying made him feel physically, emotionally he wasn't getting any better. He'd avoided answering Ginny's questions, the ones she couldn't directly ask in front of the others. It was fairly despicable of him to use his friends, and Ginny's residual shyness, to keep her from putting him on the spot. His only defence was that he didn't realize what he was doing at the time, but now he did. She

deserved to know. Harry couldn't face himself in the mirror if he continued to conceal things, no matter how embarrassing or painful.

Harry was resolved to return to the castle and face the music, when he noticed a lone figure sitting on the stands. It was rather small, but topped with a mane of fiery red hair that Harry could pick out of a crowd of thousands. Instead of landing on the pitch, he descended toward the stands, landing next to Ginny. He dismounted and sat down a few feet away, holding his broom carefully in his lap.

"Nice weather for flying," she said in a slightly strained voice.

"Yeah," Harry nodded. "The match against Ravenclaw is in a week. I'm not sure if I can be ready in time."

"Playing against Cho Chang?" she asked.

"I think so," Harry said, nodding. "I need to be at my best against her; she's a pretty good flyer."

"Very pretty in general," Ginny observed coolly.

Harry glanced at her out of the corner of his eye as he nodded agreement. Her eyebrows twitched a little – perhaps because she thought Harry was still looking out at the pitch. "She and Cedric make a good couple," he added.

Ginny frowned at Harry and he turned in his seat so he was facing her. "If you saw anything after the DA meeting, she gave me a peck on the cheek because of what I said to Cedric when everyone was accusing Hufflepuff."

The redheaded girl blushed lightly as she stared down at her hands. "Then you two never...?"

"In the future?" Harry asked, but continued without waiting for the answer. "Yeah, we went out once. It was a complete disaster," he added with a grimace.

Ginny let out the giggle she'd failed to completely swallow. "I'm sorry," she said quickly. "It's just, that look on your face..."



Harry shrugged. "I'll admit it's a bit funnier in hind-sight." He tried to remain blasé, but he knew what was coming next. She'd ask if *they* ever had a relationship, he'd tell the truth, and she'd hopefully just tell him he was more of a brother to her now. If she felt betrayed by his actions, she'd be hurt and angry. Harry wasn't sure if either of them could stand being together at The Burrow if that happened.

He clenched his hands on his broomstick to keep them from shaking.

"I didn't see you in the Great Hall at breakfast," she said, suddenly changing the subject, to Harry's vast relief.

"I didn't much feel like eating," Harry admitted.

"Well," Ginny said, bouncing to her feet, "I didn't have much to eat either, and they should be starting lunch soon. If you get any thinner, Mum won't let me and Ron hear the end of it when we go home for the holidays."

"All right," Harry agreed. It still made him smile when Ginny fussed at him like that. In at least one way, she was truly her mother's daughter.

They began walking back to the castle, side by side, Harry's Nimbus balanced on his shoulder. He enjoyed the warm sunshine and the comfortable silence when the latter was broken by Ginny's voice.

"Harry?" she asked, her voice little more than a whisper. She was looking down at the grass as they walked.

"Yeah?" he answered. It was easier, he supposed, if they weren't looking at each other.

"We were more than friends, weren't we? In the future, that is." She asked, her voice catching a little at the end.

"Yeah," he answered, steeling himself for her reaction.

She was silent for a maddening length of time. "Good," she said quietly.

The two of them, witch and wizard, walked back to the castle together. Maybe Fate wasn't such a bitch after all.

#### Author's Notes:

Well, *that* is the climax for year two. A lot of loose ends are wrapped up, and the original timeline is, shall we say, toast?

There will be another chapter to wrap up Harry's second year. (You didn't think I'd skip the Quidditch Championship, did you?). I was originally planning to do it all in 27, but this is already the longest chapter in Harry Potter and the Nightmares of Futures Past.

The ride will continue in Year 3: Harry Potter and the Dementors of Azkaban. (Yes, this will be the first year to have a different title.)

Before we go, I'd like to thank my Betas, Runsamok, Kokopelli, er the illustrious Kokopelli (beta correction) and Malkin. Without them, this would be messier, and no doubt read like it was written by one of those 'nasty Yanks'. 8 P

Note added for the tragically humor-impaired. If you will note from my profile, **I am an American**, and that was *sarcasm*. One of my betas pounces on any 'Americanisms' that creep into my writing like they were an unpleasant social disease. It's embarrassing how many people from my country fly off the handle without noting my author profile, or the smiley-face.

## Chapter 28

Luna gave them a knowing look when Harry and Ginny came in from outdoors and sat down for lunch in the Great Hall. Even though Ginny's cheeks were a little pink and her eyes were red, she managed to give her friend a small smile.

As they finished a quick meal, Ginny murmured to Harry that she had a few more questions. Harry just nodded and stood up. As they left the Great Hall, Ginny noticed Luna's eyes following them, a small smile on her lips. When they reached the seventh floor, Ginny peered curiously at Harry as he checked to make sure no one was around a seemingly deserted corridor. Then he frowned and paced back and forth in front of a tapestry of a wizard being chased by trolls in tutus.

The third time he walked past the strange tapestry, she was about to ask him what he was doing when a door suddenly appeared on the opposite wall. Harry smiled as he pulled the door open. "We won't be overheard in here," he said.

Inside was a small cosy-looking room with two overstuffed chairs pulled up before a banked fire that warmed the oddly cool air. Harry closed the door behind her as she walked in, and she jumped a little when it disappeared into the wall.

"The elves call this the 'Come and Go Room'," Harry explained as they sat down. "We used it for a Defence Club to train people when the Ministry didn't want anyone knowing proper Defence Against the Dark Arts. They sent this awful woman when Dumbledore couldn't find a Defence teacher and she pretty much tried to take over the school. So we held classes in here."

"But if she was the Defence teacher, who taught the class?" Ginny asked, "Professor McGonagall? I know Professor Flitwick was a duellist when he was younger..." her voice trailed off as Harry's face began to resemble a tomato. "You taught it?"

Harry shrugged and looked like he wanted to sink down into his chair. "Hermione organized the whole thing," he said. "She sort of put me up to it."

Ginny snorted in a way her mother would not have approved of. "Harry, you've been teaching us practically since day one. I shouldn't be surprised you've had previous experience."

Harry sighed. "I just wish it wasn't always a life and death thing," he said wearily. "It'd be nice, for just once, to teach something, to learn something for fun, and not because we want to see our thirtieth birthdays." Harry stared into the fire as his voice trailed off, and Ginny's stomach contracted as he seemed to age before her eyes. It wasn't like he suddenly grew wrinkles or grey hair, but his eyes looked so tired it tore at her heart. She wondered what he saw when the nightmares came, the nights when he ended up cooking breakfast for Mum the next day because he couldn't get back to sleep. She wanted to know, but hesitated. Would her questions open old wounds?

He'd looked so... lost... down in the chamber, when he'd told them his secret. She'd just woken from what she hoped was a horrible dream, her body wrenched out of her control and spirited away to be sacrificed to Dark Magic, but Harry looked even worse than she felt. He only spoke a handful of words, but each one seemed to exact a physical toll from him as he revealed the truth. He'd spent his life fighting the most powerful Dark Lord to arise for centuries, kept on going after everyone else was killed, and avenged them all in the end... and he told them like it was a shameful thing.

And she realized *why* he was ashamed. His destiny didn't matter. His victory didn't matter. Not to him. As far as Harry was concerned, he'd failed because he hadn't saved them *all*. She remembered waking from a nightmare of her own last night when she was in the hospital wing. The sensation as Tom tore her body away and shoved her awareness down into the inky depths was not one she'd forget any time soon. As she laid there in the dark, wishing desperately for her wand so she could have a bit of light, she tried to think about something else, anything else.

Not surprisingly, Harry immediately came to mind. She'd been thinking a lot about him, even before he'd been hurt. But instead of worrying about his injuries, or the impossibility of competing with the

perfect Cho Chang, this time her mind seized on one incontrovertible fact.

Harry had killed himself to come back and save them. Even if she'd completely misread things before, and he only saw her as an annoying little sister, he'd thrown away his victory, his freedom from that awful Prophecy, to save her and everyone she loved, her family, her friends, practically everyone she knew. That realization was both humbling and heart-breaking. It also gave her something to think about as sleep slowly reclaimed her.

His oblique confirmation of her hopes today did nothing more than strengthen Ginny's resolve to do whatever it took to help him. She remembered something her mother said once... "A sorrow shared is a sorrow divided".

"Harry," she said quietly, startling him out of his reverie. He looked over at her, blinking, and she could see him retreating inside himself again. She frowned. She didn't want him to feel like he had to maintain his façade with her, but she also didn't want him to feel like she was prying. She swallowed and stared into his eyes. She finally blurted out "What do you dream about at night?"

Harry swallowed and the light seemed to go out of his eyes for a moment. "I see you, sometimes."

"Me?" she asked.

He nodded. "You were dead. Your body lying in the courtyard," he said in a choked whisper. "While we were out looking for the places Voldemort had hidden pieces of his soul, he and his Death Eaters attacked the school. They killed everyone. We found Neville and Luna first... the DA tried to help, but they couldn't stop him, no one could. Then we found you in the corner. You were all torn and bloody and it looked like someone had been at you and..." his voice broke and he turned away.

Ginny stared at his clasped hands, the tendons standing out under the pale skin, as she tried to sort herself out. She felt like someone had dumped a bucket of ice water down her back. Harry wasn't just talking about the possibility of dying, he'd *seen* it and his anguish was

palpable. She couldn't help shuddering at the picture his words had painted in her mind.

The youngest Weasley took stock of herself and wondered what she *wanted* to do... what she *could* do. She could let things stay as they were, and wait for Harry to gather himself. She could thank him for his honesty and then let him change the subject. She could let things go back to the way they had been and pretend that none of this had ever happened.

To put it bluntly, she could be a coward.

She was scared spitless, for the second time in two days, but she wasn't a coward.

Ginny made no sound as she stood up from her chair and stepped in front of Harry. He was working so hard at mastering his emotions that he jumped when she laid her hand on his shoulder. The knotted muscles under her fingers were trembling with tension, and his eyes were two wet red holes in his face. She felt like her body was moving of its own accord, giving her an uncomfortable reminder of the previous day, when she leaned forward and lightly kissed his forehead.

The next thing she knew, she was sitting crosswise in his lap with both his arms wrapped around her. Her own arms were wrapped around his head and neck, cradling the side of his head against her chest. This might have been horribly awkward if she'd been a bit older, or maybe not. Harry was shaking so hard she wondered if her weight was the only thing holding him in the chair.

Harry wasn't the only one that needed some calming either. It was one thing to know that you'd died in some possible future. It was quite another to hear a boy you quite possibly *liked* break down crying when he described finding your ravaged and lifeless *corpse*.

Even as she tried to comfort Harry, Ginny wondered what she could do. She couldn't imagine what it would feel like, having lost everyone she cared about, only to see them all again years later. It would be like a dream come true... except it didn't change what he'd seen, what he'd experienced in that nightmarish future. A future only he

knew about. A future he couldn't talk about for almost two years. Put that way, she wondered that he hadn't gone quite mad.

She remembered how upset he'd been after Peter Pettigrew had been captured. She'd thought it was the reminder of his parents' death that had sent him stumbling into the orchard, but now she knew better. Still, she'd been able to help him, at least a little, that day.

So she ran her fingers through his hair again, concentrating on the hair above his ear, and along the back of his head, to remind him she was there. Then she asked him for the rest.

Surprisingly enough, he told her.

It went slowly at first. Harry waking up at The Burrow and contemplating suicide had been almost more than she could stand to hear. But she tightened her arm around his neck, holding him so close his voice was muffled by her robes. Then she asked him what happened next.

It hurt, hearing of how each Weasley died. They'd gone out heroically, for the most part, but she didn't really care about that. Each new name, when it came out of Harry's mouth, pierced her in a different way. She might even have found herself resenting Harry on some level, if his own pain hadn't been so evident in his broken whisper and shaking arms.

There were other names, people she didn't know, but whose loss had torn Harry as well. She'd only met Mister Lupin a couple of times at The Burrow, but Harry seemed to have been much closer to the man in the future. There were other names that she filed away to think about later. Oddly enough, it became easier as Harry talked about the horrific devastation of the latter stages of the war. Most of the people they cared about were in the forefront of the resistance to Voldemort, and thus were among the first to fall. Not that it wasn't disturbing to hear about British Wizarding society being destroyed, and the American Ministry having to send a relief force to salvage what was left.

The end was surprisingly hard. Hermione and Ron ending up together was hardly surprising, not with the way they alternated

between squabbling and staring at each other. In a weird way, she envied them a little. They'd had years together, from what Harry said, and had been with him almost to the end. But his description of Hermione's death still wrung new tears out of her. The older girl was occasionally exasperating, especially the way she tended to tell everyone else what was best for them. Her mutely asking Ron to look after Harry was just so... Hermione. And as they both cried a little, Ginny didn't think she'd ever get as frustrated with the bushy-haired witch again.

Finally, she caught her breath and voiced the last, hardest question. "Ron?" she asked.

Harry's arms tightened around her waist. "We ran into a trap," he said dully. "Voldemort had the last piece of his soul bound to an object called a horcrux. He used to have six, but we'd destroyed the rest. He couldn't die as long as it existed, so he was keeping it with him. We'd chased down a rumour on where he and his little toadies were holed up, based on intelligence from a Death-Eater the American's captured. Only it was a huge trap, set for us."

Ginny could hear the guilt in his voice, and tightened her arms a little.

"We knew it as soon as we felt the anti-apparition wards go up," he continued after a shaky breath, "even before the Death Eaters arrived. We fought our way out of there. Ron was like a bloody lion, you should have seen it..." his voice trailed off and he audibly swallowed. "We sent them running back to re-group, but I'd taken a hit. A curse got me in the leg, and I was bleeding pretty badly. We were fleeing through a block of burned-out row houses when I had to stop. Ron was half-carrying me by that point. We'd both picked up some medical charms from Hermione. He got the bleeding stopped, but the muscle was going to take a while to heal. That was when we heard the reinforcements show up."

Harry took another deep breath. His arms weren't shaking anymore and he was sitting very still. "I tried to stand up. I really did. But my leg wouldn't take any weight. That was when Ron petrified me. He slid me under a broken table and pulled my cloak out of the backpack. When he spread it over me, the only thing he said was 'I'm keeping



my promise to Hermione.’ Then he used a charm I’d never seen before... I think Hermione worked it out at some point. All I knew is that suddenly he looked like me. Then he said goodbye.”

“I didn’t see exactly what happened,” Harry continued. “I heard some shouting in the distance after a while; then the sound of curses. I know when he died though... that’s when the ***Petrificatus Totalus*** wore off. I limped along in the direction he’d gone, hoping I was wrong and it had just worn off on its own. By then the anti-apparition ward was down and the Death Eaters were long gone. I supposed they thought I’d sent Ron out as a decoy. That’s something Tom would do. I was limping so badly it took forever to get there, but I knew I was heading in the right direction when I started to find blood. I knew not all of it was his, and there were swatches of torn and charred black fabric around as well. I found Ron near an intersection. They paid a heavy price to bring him down. The bodies were missing, but from the remnants it looked like he’d taken out at least a dozen there before they got him. He was so torn up... if not for his hair I might not have recognized him. I hoped they’d been angry enough to mutilate him after he’d died, so he hadn’t been forced to endure all those wounds while he was still alive. I kept looking down at him, knowing that should have been me lying there instead.” Harry lifted his head and looked at Ginny; his eyes looked almost... bewildered. “It should have been me,” he insisted.

“It shouldn’t have been anyone,” she said softly.

Harry blinked and nodded - slowly at first, and then faster. “You’re right,” he said hoarsely. “Now you know,” he said. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” Ginny replied. She knew she probably looked as bad as he did. “I did ask, after all.” She looked at the distraught boy and cocked her head. “Thank you,” she added.

“For what?” Harry asked, puzzled.

“For telling me everything,” she answered. “Have you talked about this with anyone?”

Harry shrugged. “Some with Sirius; he got out, you know, out of Azkaban. He arrived at The Burrow over Christmas. He already knew

Occlumency, with his family and all. But I told him the general shape of things to come, not all the... details.”

“Harry James Potter!” Ginny said sharply. “That is *not* the shape of things to come! We are going to do much better this time! *You* are going to beat that bastard and we are all going to help you do it!” she snarled.

Harry, eyes widened and head pushed back against the headrest of his chair, was a somewhat comical sight, but Ginny had no time for humour just then. Instead, she sighed and absent-mindedly straightened the collar of his robes. “I’m sorry, Harry, but I don’t like hearing you talk like that. And none of this is your fault, not Ron, not any of it. You and I both know who is really responsible.”

Harry nodded and his eyes suddenly went very hard. She felt the tension building in him in a way that was almost frightening. “Voldemort,” he whispered in a voice as chill as the grave.

Ginny found the abrupt emotional transitions a little disconcerting, but she supposed he had good reason. Once they knew the source of the problem, she was sure she and her family could help him. Better for now to remind him of ways they’d already succeeded. “You said they burned down The Burrow. Is that why you wanted all those wards built around it?”

Harry shook himself a little and then nodded.

“So that’s not going to happen again, is it? We’re much better protected now,” she said. She was a little surprised that Harry was still so attached to Mum, even when he hadn’t lived with them before. She also remembered what he’d written to her Christmas before last. She silently vowed to pay the Dursleys a visit when she was seventeen.

Harry nodded, a little more energetically.

“And the DA in the future didn’t get started until your fourth year?” she asked.

“Fifth,” he answered.

“So we’re three years ahead there,” she concluded. “He won’t know what hit him, will he? What about these soul containers?” she asked.

“Sirius is looking for them,” Harry said. “He was a little sick when he showed up at The Burrow at Christmas, but he has to have been out for a while.” He made a face. “I wish I could have introduced you, but Snape hates him like poison. He’d relish a chance to inform the Ministry.”

Ginny nodded. “You had to wait until we could block him out.”

“Yeah,” Harry said. “Anyway, I told Sirius where we found the cup, where the locket ought to be, and everything I knew about the ring and the other pieces. He should be able to round them up, saving the cup for last because of the alarm.”

“You’re years ahead of the game there too, aren’t you?” Ginny asked.

“Maybe,” Harry replied. “Something odd seems to be going on. It may just be coincidental, but things sometimes seem to be determined to re-occur, one way or the other. Through different means I come to McGonagall’s attention and still become the Gryffindor Seeker. Ron and I don’t use Polyjuice Potion to sneak into the Slytherin rooms, so Draco uses it to sneak into Gryffindor. I snag the diary out of your cauldron, and those bastards still managed to trick you into writing in it!” Harry flinched as he seemed to realize what he’d just said. “I’m sorry,” he said quickly, “I didn’t mean to bring it up that way.”

Ginny suppressed a shudder and shrugged instead. “It happened,” she said. “I’d rather you be blunt about it instead of tip-toeing around it like everyone else is.”

“You really are a lot tougher than you look,” Harry said, smiling the tiniest bit.

“This me or the other me,” she asked without thinking. Watching Harry’s smile fall away, she wanted to kick herself.

“There’s not much difference, really,” he answered after a moment. “I suppose I really do need a good telling off occasionally.”

“So are you saying you need me?” she asked, laughing softly and willing her voice not to quaver.

Harry looked up at her, his eyes directly on hers when he answered. “Yes, I think I do.”

“Oh,” she said, nonplussed. “That’s good then.”

Harry took a deep breath and smiled wearily. “I suppose we should head back soon. Everyone’s going to want their turn.”

“Turn?” Ginny asked - feeling a little confused.

“To ask me for details,” he said, giving her another squeeze before he unwrapped his arms from around her waist.

“I think you’re right,” she said as she stood up. There were no pins and needles this time: either that conversation had taken less time than she thought or she fit in Harry’s lap better than she had any right to expect.

As they made their way to the exit, which was re-emerging from the wall, Ginny stopped, holding onto Harry’s sleeve. When he turned and looked at her questioningly, she leaned forward, up on her toes and kissed his cheek.

Harry froze. “Wh-what was that for?” he asked as his face blushed crimson.

“Do I need a reason?” she asked, smiling. “For answering my questions,” she answered after a moment, “for trusting me with the details and not holding anything back.”

*For letting me all the way in,* she added silently.

Harry shrugged as he struggled to regain his composure. “I just hope I don’t give you nightmares from all that crap,” he grumbled.

“Tom has that covered nicely,” she said with a grimace.

Harry scowled. “How bad was it?” he asked in a quiet voice.

Ginny shrugged as she ignored the way her stomach was turning over. "It only overcame me once, but that was pretty bad. I felt a surge as I was writing and I felt like I was falling, even though I was sitting still. Then everything went black. The next thing I knew, I was waking up in the chamber."

"He said you were too strong for him to possess," Harry said gently, "not and be able to block your memories afterward."

"Did that happen... with the other me?" she asked.

Harry nodded. "Ron thought you were just quiet, what with coming to Hogwarts, and everyone afraid and trying to figure out who the Heir of Slytherin was."

Ginny let out another less than ladylike snort. "That doesn't sound like me, does it?" she asked with a nervous laugh.

Now it was Harry's turn to shrug. "I didn't know you before the start of my second year, er, before."

Ginny sighed. "I suppose if I was some kind of wallflower first time around, then it's your fault I'm different now. Right?"

Harry rubbed at his eyes. "Maybe," he said slowly. "The way you talk now reminds me of how you were my fifth year, after we started to become friends. Any differences I see might just be caused by the fact that you aren't so quiet around me now. Does that make sense?"

"I didn't know the others very well either, did I?" she asked.

"Not so much. I never even met Luna until my fifth year. Can we just say you got a head start?" Harry asked, a little plaintively.

"That's fine," she said, "but why are you so upset?"

"I don't want you to think I changed you," he said quietly, "at least not on purpose."

"Changed me?" Ginny asked. "The only thing you did is what you said in the chamber: You tried to be my friend from the moment we met."

Harry, I *like* this me. I don't want to be some silly girl with a crush on a boy who apparently didn't even notice. You said I gave Tom a lot more of a fight this time. Is that a bad thing?"

Harry shook his head violently.

"Good," Ginny said. "I'd hate to have to hex you right after getting out of the Hospital Wing." She added with a smirk.

Harry chuckled and offered her his elbow. She hooked her arm through his as he made the door appear with a gesture.

They were quiet as they crossed the seventh floor, heading for the Fat Lady's portrait and the Gryffindor common room. Ginny didn't mind as she had a lot to take in. She found herself feeling a little wistful as she thought about everything she'd learned. It was a lot to absorb all at once. Not to mention destroying some of her more treasured illusions.

She liked to think that she was an optimist, and that things would generally tend to work out for the best. There was no way she'd have allowed herself to have a crush on Harry if she didn't have at least some hope that he'd return her feelings. Hearing Harry's story had challenged this worldview to a degree she'd have thought was impossible. Things had turned out so horribly that she couldn't picture any way it could have been worse. Even the Boy Who Lived died in the end.

Ginny shivered under her robes as she wrenched her thoughts away from thinking about Harry's future counterpart. She didn't really know what it must have been like, how he had to be feeling after he'd completed his life's work, only to find nothing left for him. The way Harry described it, he'd almost been happy to die at that point. As much as the deaths of her family, even more than the betrayal of the Diary, that thought hounded Ginevra Weasley, and she found herself hating Voldemort more than she'd ever thought possible.

She remembered Harry talking about the Killing Curse once, and how you really had to hate your target to make it work. The thought that in the future Harry hated himself enough to use the curse on himself was horrifying enough. But now, with all she'd learned today, she

realized that it was indeed possible for her to hate someone that much.

Now she'd learned that things didn't always work out for the best, and that she, too, could learn to hate, even to kill. Realizations like that had to be part of why Harry acted so differently... It wasn't like you could learn such things and still be a child, could you?

Ginny slowly realized as they approached the portrait that her childhood had ended. That was why she felt so unsettled. There is a proper time and place for discarding childish things, and not-quite-twelve is a bit young for that. Then she looked over at Harry, his features settling back into what she recognized as his 'public face'. *He needs me*, she thought. It was both a scary and a powerful feeling.

Maybe growing up fast wouldn't be so bad after all.

OoOoO

Harry felt Ginny's hand tighten around his arm. *I can't believe that just happened*, he mused. He'd entered the Room of Requirement with the determination to answer any question she asked. He'd danced around things long enough and she deserved to know the truth. But still... when she asked such an open-ended question as "What do you dream about at night?" his brain seemed to lock up.

But his mouth didn't.

He sat there, almost in a daze, listening like a witness as he mechanically told her everything – the whole tragic chronology of the failed Second War against Voldemort. He felt, in a disconnected way, how she shuddered each time his narrative was punctuated with the death of another member of her family.

By the end, he was sure she'd break; sure she'd begin screaming at him, especially when he told her about Ron. His best friend had literally given his life for Harry's, just so he would have a chance to fulfil that damned prophecy. But that wasn't really why Ron had done it. He'd done it for *Harry*, his best mate and brother in everything but name, not the bloody Boy Who Lived.

Ginny had yelled at him a little after that, but only because he'd spoken like the future was a foregone conclusion, exposing his anxiety about the unusual parallels he was seeing between the two timelines. Her words, her righteous anger, her overwhelming confidence that "*they would win!*" seemed to have re-ignited something inside of himself, something that had guttered out over the last couple of months... choked by his worries about his friends, his enemies, and the future.

Harry glanced sideways at the girl walking beside him, her arm still locked with his. He owed her more than he could likely ever explain.

When the portrait swung aside they separated and stepped into the Gryffindor common room. They found Ron and Hermione on one of the couches, apparently waiting for them.

"I heard you went flying," Ron said quickly as he stood up, ignoring an annoyed glance from Hermione, "how did it go?"

Harry shrugged. "Like stretching after a long nap; I should be fine, if Madam Pomfrey will release me to play."

"No headaches?" Hermione asked worriedly. "No dizziness or spots in your eyes?"

"Nothing," Harry said, but then paused. "No more than usual, anyway."

"Yeah, you've been talking to my sister," Ron said with a laugh, earning simultaneous glares from Ginny and Hermione.

"So, Harry," Hermione said brightly, in an obvious effort to change the topic of conversation and forestall the impending violence, "I understand you still want to take your exams?"

"I still say he's mental," Ron grumbled as Harry nodded. "If Professor McGonagall offered to let *me* skip them, I'd take her up on it so fast it would make your head spin."



Harry shrugged. "I'd feel pretty odd, sitting around while you all sit your final examinations. I might as well participate and hope Mrs. Weasley doesn't ground me if I do poorly."

"Not much chance of that, Harry," Ron said shaking his head. "You didn't see how she fussed over you in the Hospital Wing."

Harry felt his face flush with an odd mixture of pleasure and embarrassment. Mrs. Weasley tried so hard to be a mother to him. He noticed Hermione smiling at him, while Ginny's gaze was a little more penetrating. He stifled a sudden sense of being exposed. Had he become so used to concealing the truth that being open with one person should make him so uncomfortable? Especially when it was Ginny, of all people? Maybe it was time to practice a little more honesty. "Well, she *is* the closest thing I have to a mother," he said, "so it's nice to hear that she really does love me."

Harry felt his face colouring again, but that was nothing compared to the embarrassed blush that covered Ron's face. "Don't say things like that around her, Harry, or if you do, pass out some earplugs first. She'll rupture your eardrums if she doesn't break your back first."

"Ron," Hermione said in a disapproving tone, "just because some of us have more emotional depth than a teaspoon is no reason to become sarcastic."

They both jumped when Harry let out a short bark of laughter. "Sorry," he said quickly, "that's not the first time I've heard that. Emotional range of a teaspoon, anyway," he chortled.

They both stared at him for a moment before Hermione's eyes lit up in comprehension. "I see," she said. "Anyway, would you like to go somewhere to revise?" she asked. "I have my notes for the classes you missed," she added, patting the bag hanging from her shoulder.

"I should go over my charms notes," Ginny said. "And I still have a transfiguration essay to finish." Her smile toward Harry was a bit knowing.

"That would probably be a good idea, Hermione," he agreed. "I'll see you for supper?" he asked Ginny in a quieter tone.

She nodded.

“Good,” was all he said, but her cheeks still flushed a bit. Sometimes it was fun having friends who were so fair-skinned.

Harry went up to his dormitory and came back down with his own bag. The sight of his damaged trunk still stirred up an undercurrent of anger that he tried to banish.

As he left the common room with Hermione, Harry noticed that she hadn't even made a token effort to get Ron to come revise with them. He headed off down the hall, but stopped when Hermione cleared her throat.

“Harry?” she asked. “Aren't we going to the Library?”

“I know someplace a little quieter,” he said, and led her to the Room of Requirement. He rather enjoyed the way his friend's eyes bulged when he summoned the door. Inside was his idea of a nice study room, with a good-sized table, comfortably-padded chairs, and a chandelier that spread warm golden light throughout the room.

“Harry,” she breathed when he finished his explanation. “This... this is fantastic. You said it can make itself into whatever we need?”

He nodded.

“We'll have to start using this for our training,” she said, “especially during the winter.”

Harry smiled. “It can expand the perceived size as well, so we can run in here too. I'd have used it earlier, but...”

Hermione grimaced. “But Professor Snape would have found out and immediately placed it off limits.”

Harry nodded. “Probably while using it himself. Anyway, what are we working on in transfiguration?”

Hermione blinked for a moment then remembered what they were ostensibly supposed to be doing there. She reluctantly got out her notes.

Harry probably enjoyed this more than almost any study session he could remember. For one thing, he didn't have to spend all his time making sure he didn't appear to be too knowledgeable. For another, Hermione, usually so focused, was obviously distracted by some *other* questions she wanted to ask. He let it drag out until he began to feel a little guilty.

"Hermione," he finally said. "Was there something else you wanted to discuss?"

His friend didn't hesitate, and quickly dug a tightly-rolled parchment out of her bag and tapped it with her wand. As it unrolled, Harry saw it contained a long list of questions, with a little space between each one. He couldn't help but laugh a little at her preparations.

"Harry," she protested primly, "it's not that odd I should be prepared. I've had most of the night and all morning to think about what you told us. It's very fascinating, looking at causation and how your efforts have impacted it. Now, you said your future self arrived right before you started your first year. Is it safe to assume that everything before that was congruent between the two timelines?"

Harry nodded. "I think so. I haven't seen anything to indicate they were any different."

Hermione jotted down a few notes. "Good. So what is the first major divergence you are aware of? And how did it go in your original memories?"

Harry began to speak as Hermione's quill never stopped moving. She occasionally interrupted him to ask clarifying questions, but for the most part he did all the talking.

Just recounting the facts was making him start to tighten up again, especially regarding the Dursleys, and he silently blessed Ginny for asking him first. He didn't think he could have answered all of

Hermione's questions if he hadn't just purged a lot of his negative emotions.

As it was, he stumbled a bit when he recounted Hermione's nearly-fatal broom accident.

"Is that why you wanted me to learn how to fly better?" she asked in a small voice.

"Partially," Harry agreed. "You were actually pretty good after you practiced a bit."

The bushy-haired witch nodded gravely. "I'll try to remember that," she promised.

It was funny, in a way; how Hermione's dry questions and factual dissection of the future disaster also seemed to help put things in perspective. Every time he went through what happened, it seemed to be a little less painful, like he was draining an infected wound. It was also easier to see the patterns that began to emerge. Ginny's death seemed to galvanize her brothers, and even though they never blamed Harry, they did throw themselves into the thick of the struggle against Voldemort. He didn't think Bill and Charlie would have been quite as quick to commit themselves to such dangerous offensives if she'd still been alive.

In contrast, Hermione became increasingly agitated as he continued, so Harry didn't dwell on the details of her own death, only relating that she'd pushed Ron out of the way of the curse that killed her. Unsurprisingly, she didn't press him for more. Harry couldn't help but tell her more about Ron's heroic death, and her eyes were shining by the time he was done.

She was quiet as Harry related his last year, fighting alone against Voldemort and his Death Eaters. Her fingers were white with pressure on her quill as she took down the names of the Death Eaters he'd recognized among those he'd killed in the ruins of Hogwarts. Then he talked of the scheme he'd hatched to feed false information to Voldemort's suspected spy amongst the Americans, and how he'd finally caught the Dark Lord off guard and finished him.

Hermione began asking questions again when Harry discussed his recovery and how he'd stumbled over the Temporal Transit Field article and realized how it could be used on himself. When he mentioned in passing his 'inner Hermione' and how he puzzled things out by discussing them with an imaginary version of his friend, the real Hermione suddenly burst into tears.

"I'm sorry," he said as she dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief she pulled from her bag.

"Don't be," she replied. "I just didn't expect... I knew you would have missed me, even if I am a bossy know-it-all, but hearing you say that... just... thank you, Harry."

Harry blinked. "Er, right. Well, after I saw how it might work, I talked to Albus' portrait and we figured out how to get the soul to migrate..." He glossed over some of the technical details of the time jump, and noted, with some amusement, Hermione visibly restraining herself from asking for more.

When he was done, Hermione looked back over her notes and began asking questions regarding their years at Hogwarts. Harry was grateful, as the early years, at least, had been relatively peaceful. Some of her questions seemed almost random, but Harry knew her too well not to believe there was a pattern to it. Especially after she tipped her hand a little.

"So as a part of the tournament, they actually held a Yule Ball?" she asked, eyes lighting up. Well, she was a girl, after all, Harry mused.

"Yeah, it was sort of a bother really," Harry said in a bored tone.

"Really?" she asked archly. "I suppose your date was a bore then."

"Parvati was okay," Harry protested, "it was really a hassle though. All those people staring at us, not to mention Rita Skeeter's articles winding every one up. I think everyone had their nose out of joint before the year was over – even Mrs. Weasley was giving you the cold shoulder at one point."

Hermione's eyebrows went up. "I can see why you appropriated her quill at the first opportunity then. Just out of curiosity, who did everyone else go with?"

"Let's see," Harry responded and began ticking off on his fingers. "Neville and Ginny went together. I don't think Luna went at all. Ron went with Padma, and you were with this Quidditch player from Durmstrang."

Hermione looked up at him, a little surprised. Then she looked back down at her notes and asked him about the specific tasks used in the Tri-Wizard Tournament. However, some of her later questions nibbled around the area of social relations and who was dating who.

At this point Harry decided to have a little fun with his friend, if she wasn't able to just come out and ask him what she really wanted to know. "Yeah, after Umbridge forced Dumbledore to leave, Fred and George declared an all out prank war on her. You sort of disapproved at first, but you came around when you saw a lot of the professors discreetly encouraging them. We had a good laugh about that at your wedding reception."

"My... wedding reception?" Hermione asked. "To who?"

"Well, Fred and George, of course," Harry answered with a broad smile. He chuckled and shrugged as his friend's mouth dropped open. "We were a little surprised at first, you know, about your *relationship*, but you always preferred to do the modern thing... You seemed very happy with the two of them."

"*Both?*" she squeaked. Her face had gone absolutely white.

"No.," Harry said straight-faced. "I'm kidding; but you were so busy trying to trick me into revealing something you didn't want to directly ask that you fell for it. Let's neither one of us play games; just ask me directly."

Hermione swallowed. "Did Ron and I end up... together?"

Harry opened his mouth to answer, but paused. "Do you really want to know the answer to that question?" he asked quietly. "Won't that take some of the fun out of things?"

Hermione frowned. "That's not the reason you don't want to answer."

"It's part of it," Harry said defensively. "This is one thing where I am worried about foreknowledge screwing things up. What if I tell you one thing, and that makes you start taking things for granted, and then the whole thing gets bollixed?"

The bushy-haired witch's eyes narrowed. "If you are so concerned about that, then it must be someone who is here at Hogwarts for me to ignore. And you've been subtly nudging me and Ron toward each other even before Ginny and Luna started. It *is* Ron, isn't it?"

Harry sighed. "Yes, and if you screw it up, you'll prove that old saw about people who are book-smart and common sense deficient. I will personally kick your arse if you hurt him."

Hermione's eyes widened at his vehemence, and then she looked down. "This is all speculative anyway," she said, "aside from a desire to show up his brothers, I don't even know if he likes me or not."

Harry grunted. This conversation was heading downhill in a hurry. "Yeah, right. I'll just point out that he did agree to take Arithmancy and Ancient Runes with us, after I told him you were badgering him because you wanted to study with him."

Hermione's face flushed. "I didn't! Not for that! I mean not only for that! Harry, how could you?"

"He said yes, didn't he?" Harry asked, smirking.

Hermione looked down at her parchment for several long moments. When she looked up again, her expression was merely cautious and no longer flustered. "Did we have a big wedding?" she asked in a small, wistful voice.

“Er, actually you didn’t have much of a wedding,” Harry said. “Things were chaotic, the Ministry was in chaos, there really wasn’t time, with the war and all,” he added quickly.

Hermione’s face still bore a shocked expression. “I’m surprised my parents didn’t object, war or no war.”

Harry blew out a deep breath. “Their neighbourhood was caught in a purge in ’99... they didn’t make it,” he said in a low voice. “Look,” he added quickly when he saw her stricken expression, “I did bear witness when you two exchanged vows in a burned out Muggle church. They were magically binding, even. Left spots in front of my eyes for nearly a fortnight.”

Hermione was blinking rapidly. “What were the words we used?”

“They were pretty long,” Harry said with a shrug. “Tell you what, if the time comes and you are desperate for inspiration, I’ll get a Pensieve and we’ll go dredging for that memory. All right?”

Hermione nodded, her eyes still a bit bright. She looked down at her heavily-annotated parchment. “I’ll get started on a general timeline we can use to compare with ours.”

Harry nodded. “That sounds like a good idea. You and Ron were pretty good at working out strategies, so you may want to get him involved when you get a better idea of what we want to do next.”

She nodded and began gathering up her things.

“Er, weren’t we supposed to revise a bit?” Harry asked lightly.

Hermione went very still for a moment. “Harry, surely you don’t need to,” she protested.

Harry shrugged. “We need to spend enough time here that people won’t get suspicious,” he explained. “Could you at least list the topics that will be covered? This exam took place a long time ago for me.”

His friend smiled as she dug out her transfiguration notes.



OoOoO

Harry and Hermione left the Room of Requirement in plenty of time to go to dinner with everyone in the Great Hall. A few whispers followed them through the corridors, but it was hard to tell if they were muttering about Harry, who was awake after his coma, or Ginny, who had disappeared shortly before the entire school had been locked down.

Not that it really mattered. Harry sent pointed glares at the worst offenders and tried to ignore the rest. Ron also looked particularly murderous, and the back of his neck was bright red. From what Hermione had told him, his friend got detention while Harry was unconscious in the hospital wing for decking a fourth year Slytherin student who'd picked a bad time to crow about the comatose Gryffindor.

Ginny didn't act like she had a care in the world, and Harry envied her aplomb. Luna maintained an equally clueless façade. Maybe. Neville, on the other hand, seemed to be channelling his grandmother, and looked down his nose with extreme scorn at the students who did not meet his standards of acceptable behaviour.

One glance at his friend even jarred Ron out of his sour mood. As they sat down in their usual places, he whispered, "That's bloody brilliant, Neville."

The stocky boy shrugged. "Luna suggested it. She said if it intimidated me, it should work really well on others. It's sort of fun, really, being on the other side of that."

Harry also wondered if it would make such glares from Madam Longbottom a bit less effective on her grandson. He gave Luna a quick smile, but she didn't seem to notice.

While they were waiting for the food to be served, Harry's eyes were drawn toward the Slytherin table. Melissa Bulstrode wasn't hard to recognize, and she seemed to be involved in an argument with a smaller boy who also had a prefect's badge on his robes. The words were too quiet to hear, but from the boy's posture and clenched fists,

Harry didn't doubt he'd have attacked Melissa if she wasn't head and shoulders taller than he was.

The stalemate was broken when Professor Sinistra descended from the high table. Her face was set in a disapproving expression as she spoke to the two prefects. Abruptly she scowled and seemed to speak sharply. With a muted clatter, the emeralds in the Slytherin hourglass shifted to show they'd just lost ten house points.

The male prefect's face purpled and he spat something angrily. Professor Sinistra spoke again and Slytherin lost another twenty points. The boy seemed on the verge of apoplexy when Professor Sinistra reached out and plucked the prefect badge from his robes.

"Never thought I'd see *that*," Ron said in a low undertone. He was too shocked to openly gloat about the lost points, for which Harry was quietly grateful.

As Professor Sinistra returned to the high table, the air above the plates wavered and the students were suddenly distracted by the presence of their evening meal. Harry tried to relax and enjoy the first meal he'd eaten with his friends in a while, but it still felt a little odd not to have Snape glowering at them from the high table.

A nudge in his side jolted him out of his thoughts, and he looked over at Ginny, who was passing him the mashed potatoes. "I'm not getting lectured by Mum if I can help it, so we've only got a week to get you fattened up a bit," she said primly.

Harry smiled at her and scooped some of the starchy mass onto his plate. He put that down and grabbed a platter loaded with steaks still smoking from being grilled. He slid one off onto Ginny's plate before taking three for himself and passing the platter to Neville. Hermione nagged Ron, whose plate was already loaded with meat and jacket potatoes, into taking some of the vegetable medley.

He was healthy, his friends were alive, he'd told them his secrets and none of them cared. *It was good to be alive*, Harry reflected as he dug into his meal.

It was over an hour later that they returned to the Gryffindor tower. Harry was a little on edge, knowing Ron and Neville would want their turns as well. He wasn't sure about Luna - which was nothing new.

After a single game of chess, which he of course lost since he was playing Ron, Harry yawned and said he was making an early night of it.

Ginny, who was still reading her charms textbook, smiled as Ron and Neville both said they were going to turn in as well.

Harry pondered his options as they ascended the stairs. Dean and Seamus usually stayed up fairly late on weekend nights, so they'd have a little time to talk, even if their dormitory wasn't quite as secure as the Room of Requirement.

He decided to go through his usual evening routine, and was putting on his pyjamas before Ron spoke up.

"Did Hermione put you through the third degree?" Ron asked.

Harry straightened as he buttoned up the front of his shirt. "Yeah," he said after a moment.

Ron stared at him. "You're pretty calm about it. I figure she'd have worn you to a frazzle by now."

Harry shrugged. "She has a right to know. So do you."

Ron looked thoughtful as he sat down on his bed. "I can wait," he said. "If you and Hermione know what's coming, you'll let us know when we need to. I also don't have to worry about letting something slip."

Harry stared at Ron, who fortunately didn't notice.

"It's a little like chess, innit?" Ron asked in a thoughtful voice. "When you are trying to anticipate your opponent's moves, if you change one move in a sequence, they do something different, and it throws everything else off. You've been making a lot of changes, haven't you?"

Harry nodded.

“Then it’s going to be ruddy complicated. We can talk about it later, back at The Burrow,” Ron said. “Er, V-Voldemort isn’t likely to attack before end of term, is he?”

“No Ron,” Harry said with a laugh. Then he turned toward Neville, who’d just finished brushing his teeth.

“I talked to Luna,” the round-faced boy said. “We both know it was pretty bad, but you told us almost the minute you knew you could. She said we should trust you, and I agree.”

Harry had to clear his throat before he could speak again. “Thanks mate.”

“It’s not like Hermione doesn’t trust you,” Ron said quickly. “She just can’t stand to not know something, and she may not be around much this summer if her parents take her on holiday.” Ron didn’t look particularly happy about that, but Harry decided not to mention it. “You know how she is about summer homework,” Ron added with a grin.

Harry shrugged. “It’s all right. She might be able to see a pattern in things that I can’t. She’s clever, and she’s bound to be more objective. I actually feel better with her fully in the know.”

Ron nodded as he swung his legs up on the bed and lay down. “She is a bit frightening when she sinks her teeth into something. Even Percy doesn’t get as focused as she does.” He smiled up at the canopy as he stretched out and folded his hands behind his head.

Harry blew out the candle as he climbed into his own bed. Neville followed suit and soon the room was lit only by the moonlight filtering through the window.

“Harry,” Ron asked after a moment.

“Yeah?”

“Am I wasting my time going out for Quidditch? Should I just focus on other things?” Ron didn’t succeed in keeping all of the tension out of his voice.

“Only if you don’t want to play Keeper after Oliver leaves,” Harry replied. He wondered if Ron could see his smile in the moonlit gloom.

“Was I any good?” Ron asked in a very small voice.

“After your first few games, they started singing songs about you,” Harry replied. Then he cleared his voice and softly began to sing:

*“Weasley is our King,  
Weasley is our King,  
He didn't let the Quaffle in,  
Weasley is our King.”*

*“Weasley can save anything,  
He never leaves a single ring,  
That's why Gryffindors all sing:  
Weasley is our King.”*

“They sang that?” Ron asked in an awed voice, “about me?”

“They did,” Harry assured him. “When you were on your game you were bloody near impossible to score on. If things had turned out differently, you might have gone pro.”

“That’s brilliant,” Ron whispered.

“No, *you* were brilliant,” Harry corrected him.

Harry didn’t know it was possible to hear someone smiling.

OoOoO

The next morning, Harry resumed his interrupted training routine. While Madam Pomfrey’s salves had prevented atrophy of his major muscle groups, Harry had still spent a long time on his back. He was forcibly reminded of this during the morning run, which he finished lagging well behind his friends. When they sparred, his reactions all

seemed a half-second slow, so he gave up in disgust and just worked on his katas until everyone was ready to go in.

At breakfast, a nondescript owl dropped a letter on Harry's plate. Harry tossed it a bit of sausage and discreetly waved his wand over the parchment, something he usually did when he didn't recognize the owl. Nothing seemed amiss, so he broke the seal and read the message within:

*Some of my colleagues are taking certain personnel changes quite seriously and are seeking to address their grievances with someone they believe to be responsible. Other elements would rather make sure that a certain injured player does not become healthy enough to participate. Even if they have no prayer of winning the Cup, they'd rather take steps to insure you don't. Watch your arse.*

*-Your favourite prank victim*

Harry frowned and slipped the folded parchment into his pocket.

"What is it?" Ginny asked him.

"Slytherin is gunning for me," he said in a low voice.

"So what else is new?" Ron asked, scowling.

"Aside from avenging their former head of house, they are looking to make sure I don't play against Ravenclaw," Harry added dryly.

"Those bloody bastards!" Ron spat.

"Ron!" Hermione barked. "Language!"

"But this is *Quidditch!*" he protested.

"No," his sister corrected, "this is *Harry!*"

"Could we possibly keep it down to a dull roar?" Harry asked plaintively. Some of the Gryffindors were eyeing them curiously.

"Sorry," all three of them muttered simultaneously, causing Neville to choke on his pumpkin juice. Harry snorted and shook his head.

After Neville wiped his mouth with his napkin, he frowned. "So what do we do about this?"

"We could talk to Professor McGonagall," Hermione suggested.

"After we hex any Slytherins that look twice at Harry," Ron growled.

"I'm not letting Harry out of my bloody sight," Ginny grumbled.

"Might get a bit tricky in the loo," Harry whispered, making her blush and laugh. His emotional rollercoaster was still on an upswing, and after all, it was only a threat against him, personally.

"You know, no one has ever caught a Crumple-Horned Snorkack before," Luna said dreamily. "Father thinks it's because they are far smarter than people like to believe. When they see an expedition show up, with their baits and their traps and their nets, they just vacate the area until it leaves."

Ron and Hermione stared at the blond Gryffindor like she'd grown an extra head for the fun of it.

Neville, frowning as he scratched the side of his head, suddenly straightened up in his seat. "You mean instead of taking obvious precautions, we should be more subtle?"

"If you think the average Slytherin is as clever as a *Crumple-Horned Snorkack*, then I think we should," Luna replied.

"So we bait the trap," Harry said in a quiet voice, "and let them set up an ambush. Only the ambush gets sprung on *them*."

"Bait?" Neville asked.

"Me," Harry answered with a shrug.

"Absolutely not," Ginny said firmly. "Not alone anyway."

"She actually has a point," Ron said thoughtfully, ignoring the glare from his sister. "We don't usually leave you alone much, especially not since you were hurt. They'd smell a trap a mile away if you were

wandering around by yourself. And the best time I could think of to set up an ambush is one of those times when we're all together."

"When no adults are around... After our morning exercises?" Hermione asked in a very quiet voice.

That conversation set the tone for the rest of the week. Harry rejoined his classes with nary a stumble, given that his missed assignments had been waived at the headmaster's request. He was able to follow the final lessons of the term, sitting his examinations without much difficulty, and brazenly gave Hermione credit for telling him where they were in the textbooks. It wasn't *his* fault if people assumed she'd done a lot more than that.

To make the bait a little sweeter, they stopped practicing spell work during their morning practices, and made sure their wands were concealed from casual observers until they were getting dressed for classes. Harry found the wand-holster he'd received for Christmas particularly useful.

At Ron's suggestion, they also went a bit easier on the physical training. It rankled a bit, but Harry recognized his friend's reasoning. It would be better, in the event of a confrontation, if their hands were steady and their breathing was not laboured.

Of course, Harry still pushed himself a bit. He still had to convince Madam Pomfrey that he'd be fit to fly for the match. It would be a rather painful sort of irony if his preparation to avoid being knocked out of competing resulted in him not being able to play anyway.

That thought made him wonder if the note had been a bluff, possibly sent by someone else, but quickly dismissed the thought. There were details included that only he and Melissa knew. Given her venomous hatred of Marcus Flint, Harry also doubted she would do anything to help her housemates, quidditch-wise.

By Thursday morning though, Harry was starting to wonder. Had he misinterpreted the note? Did the Slytherins have an attack of good sense? Had they accidentally tipped their hand? Those thoughts were unwelcome companions as they ran along the lakeshore. It was almost a relief as they returned to the castle and several figures in



hooded cloaks stepped out of the early-morning shadows of the courtyard. A muted boom echoed from the depths of the castle and Harry had little doubt that Argus Filch would be rather distracted for the next few minutes.

"We know what you did, Potter," one of the figures said, its voice rasping and echoing hollowly. Harry was surprised for a moment, but then realized that it was a charm – the Slytherins didn't want their voices being recognized. It was a relief, in an odd way: they obviously weren't intending to kill them all in cold blood if they were worried about witnesses.

"What I did isn't as important as what I'm about to do," Harry snarled and suddenly Harry's wand was in his hand. "*Protego Maximus!*" he yelled as the first curses arced toward them. The shimmering wall appeared before them, and the Slytherin spells began to ricochet back into the courtyard at crazy angles.

Harry easily held the shield as his friends quietly pulled out their wands. He kept a close eye out for the Unforgivable curses or anything else he couldn't block, but he didn't think they'd resort to those. As it was, sparks and bouncing rays of light filled the dewy air and left faint scorch marks on the weathered stone.

"I count seven of them," Ron said, blinking at a particularly bright flash of light as a curse dissipated against Harry's shield charm. "Call your targets, counting from the left. I got one."

"Four," Hermione hissed, sighting down her wand at one of the smaller figures.

"Five," Neville said.

"Seven," Luna said, her voice showing no signs of distraction at the moment.

"Two and three are close together," Ginny said in an uncharacteristically grim voice, "I'll see if I can get them both."

"Then I'll target on six after I drop the shield," Harry agreed. "Remember to scatter when it drops."

They nodded and touched their wands to each ear. Harry copied their gesture with a grin.

Harry watched the volume of incoming fire, waiting for it to falter. Continuous spell casting required a lot of energy, especially if you were throwing curses and trying to batter down someone else's shield. A moment later, the flashes of magic subsided. A couple of the cloaked figures were still casting, but most of them were moving to each side, trying to reach a position from where they could shoot around his barrier.

Harry dropped to one knee and raised his wand, letting the barrier dissipate almost immediately. He saw his friends scatter soundlessly, firing spells he couldn't hear. Then he brought his wand back down in a slashing motion toward target number six and shouted "*Concussus!*"

A sphere of air seemed to shimmer in the middle of the courtyard, contracting sharply and then exploding outward. A visible ripple in the air reached them and his skull rang with the sound of an explosion – the only thing he'd heard, aside from his own voice, since charming his ears to block out all sounds.

The cloaked figure near the epicentre of the detonation was picked up and flung bodily into the air. The others, many of whom were stunned, bound in ropes, petrified, or being attacked by animated mucus, were also knocked to the ground. A final volley of stunners from the Gryffindor students put most of them out of their misery.

Harry tapped his ears to restore his hearing, just in time to hear Hermione say something under her breath that was highly out of character. He looked at her in confusion, but then followed the direction in which she was pointing.

Several of the windows facing onto the entrance yard now had significant cracks, and a few were completely missing panes of glass.

"Bugger," was all Harry could say as the front doors opened.

OoOoO

As they all stood in the Headmaster's office for the second time in less than a week, Harry was trying to figure out if the old man was more amused than angry about the damage to the school. His friends were a lot easier to read; they were petrified. As soon as Harry explained that he'd cast the spell that created that thunderous detonation, the attention was focused primarily on him.

"I got the idea from a muggle device I saw on the telly," he explained. "It's called a Flash-Bang, basically a small bomb that just makes a very bright flash and a very loud sound. They use it to disable people without killing them, sir." The American War-mages had not been averse to using Muggle technology to gain an advantage in a fight.

"So you took a regular noisemaking spell and...?" The headmaster asked, his eyes twinkling again.

Harry shrugged. "I cast it a lot harder than what it takes for a simple noise-maker, so that stepped up the output a bit."

"A bit," Professor McGonagall said in a very chill voice. "Enough to shatter twenty-three panes of glass and damage a dozen more."

Harry scowled. "We were defending ourselves from an unprovoked attack."

"That is what *you* say, Mr. Potter," Professor Sinistra replied calmly. "We will see what my students say when they are released from the Hospital Wing."

Harry nodded politely. "I understand that you have to be their advocate in these circumstances, but it might be interesting to ask them why they were up at that hour wearing hooded cloaks and using voice-altering charms."

"I will," the dark-haired woman responded, "as soon as Madam Pomfrey has regrown their eardrums and they can hear the question."

"Which brings us back to my point, Mr. Potter," Professor McGonagall continued. "Don't you think your response to this situation might have been a bit extreme? Seven students are in the Hospital Wing."

Harry stared his head of house directly in the eye. "No Ma'am, I do not. From our work in the Duelling Association, I've become fairly adept at recognizing various spells on sight. I blocked at least two cutting charms, and perhaps as many as five. It was a little hard to see with all the flashes at one point. In any event, as we both know that particular spell can be lethal, depending on where it strikes, which is why we don't allow it for practice duels."

"You are quite certain of this, Harry?" Professor Dumbledore asked.

Harry nodded. "I got a warning that some of the Slytherin students were determined to make sure I was too injured to play Quidditch this weekend. Stunners won't do that, but gross bodily harm will."

Professor McGonagall went very still and then her facial expression became truly frightening. The Astronomy professor began minutely examining her fingernails.

The headmaster's face, however, settled into lines of disapproval. "Harry, you should have come to me or Minerva as soon as you received this warning."

"I'm sorry sir," Harry replied, "but that would have put my Slytherin source at risk. This person warned me at a potential risk to themselves. If you had taken steps before the actual event, it would possibly have exposed them. I am not willing to gamble with the safety of an ally."

"Instead," Professor McGonagall observed, "you decided to risk the lives of *six* students instead."

Harry shrugged. "I wanted to spring the ambush myself, but..."

"But we wouldn't let him do it alone," Ron said quickly, and then ducked his head back down.

"I'd have preferred for them to stay out of it," Harry said ruefully, "but I have enough people wanting to send me to Madam Pomfrey as it is. Tactically, when an ambush is reversed, the initiative belongs to the side that was being ambushed. The enemy was not able to pierce my shielding charm, and when they moved to flank us, we

counterattacked and defeated them. I wonder if we can write this up for extra credit in Defence Against the Dark Arts?"

Professor McGonagall, who was a bit annoyed at having to supervise Lockhart's classes after Madam Pomfrey was unable to restore his mind, shook her head.

"Be that as it may, Harry, I would rather you brought these things to me, or your head of house," Professor Dumbledore said in an even voice.

Harry sighed. "I understand. But you know what I have to do; the sooner we grow accustomed to dealing with things ourselves, the better for everyone."

"I'm truly sorry you feel that way, Harry. But pending the results of an inquiry with the injured students, I must place you on restriction and bar you from playing Quidditch this weekend. Justice is not something to be lightly taken into your own hands," Dumbledore said, his eyes twinkling even less than usual, "It pains me to do this, but the safety of *all* of my students must be my highest priority."

Harry stood rigidly, ignoring the outraged expressions on his friends' faces. "I understand, sir. *Completely*. The message you are trying to send is quite clear."

"I hope that you do understand, Harry. Please report to Mr. Filch. When the glass has been cleared away and the windows repaired, you may return to class. I believe your next exam is not until this afternoon, so you should have sufficient time to prepare. Harry, please try to think about what I've said today." Dumbledore sat back in his chair and turned toward Professor McGonagall.

Harry didn't need to be told he was dismissed. He ignored the professors' voices behind him as he marched toward the door. It flew open as he reached for the doorknob, but he was too angry to think about that at the moment.

OoOoO

As soon as the door shut behind the students, Minerva McGonagall spun toward the headmaster. "Albus, have you completely lost your *mind*?" she hissed.

"Lemon Sherbet?" he asked her in an irritatingly mild voice.

"My students defend themselves from an unprovoked attack, so you decide to *punish* them, alienating some of the best students in their year, and you think offering me a Muggle sweet will shut me up?" she demanded, her accent becoming thicker as her voice became louder.

"Professor," Dumbledore said with a sigh, "the Slytherin dormitories are filled with some very unsettled children at this moment. With the departure of Professor Snape, many of them feel they have no advocates left on the staff. I have received several owls from the parents of Slytherin students, stating that they are considering withdrawing their children from Hogwarts."

"And good riddance to them, if they are leaving because that man is gone!" she countered. "His gross favouritism toward his students was a professional embarrassment to the rest of us."

"I must admit," Professor Sinistra added cautiously, "that while many of the students are upset, I have also noticed that many of them have... unusual... expectations regarding my policies as temporary head of house."

"If these students see seven of their housemates put in the hospital wing, and the one who did it receives no punishment, I fear that will be all it takes to drive them away. Many of them come from families with unsavoury reputations. Hogwarts may represent their last chance to choose a different path."

"And to save them from their own choices, you'll treat other students unfairly." McGonagall replied. "I wonder how many will see how you punish them and act accordingly. If Mr. Potter's informant was to be believed, the sole aim of this attack was to prevent him from playing this weekend. Congratulations, Albus, *you* have succeeded where *they* failed."

“Harry is far too.,” Dumbledore began, but paused before continuing. “Far too dangerous to be allowed to take matters into his own hands. Those students could have been killed this morning.”

“All the better reason to punish those who started it,” she observed primly. “Besides, what could you have done if he had reported it to you beforehand?”

“We could have taken steps to ensure this battle never started,” he answered.

“That is exactly why he didn’t tell you, Albus! Mr. Potter as much as said he was afraid his informant would have been harmed if it was obvious he’d received a warning.”

“I think you both exaggerate the danger,” the headmaster replied sternly. “A student won’t be murdered for carrying tales.”

“Mr. Potter has far less confidence in the safety to be found within Hogwarts, and with good reason! In two years he’s encountered V-Voldemort, a basilisk, and three different professors who assaulted him or were party to an assault. Beyond that, there’s at least one student roaming at large who robbed him and nearly killed him! And now you have told him that if he defends himself, he will be punished. Albus, the wise ruler punishes vice and rewards virtue. You have turned that rule on its ear,” Minerva said bitterly.

McGonagall rarely gave in to her temper, but this was too much – and she had several sore points where Harry Potter was concerned, one of them over a decade old.

“Might I remind you, Albus, that it was *you* who entrusted him to his Muggle relatives, over my *severe* reservations, and notwithstanding Hagrid’s report about their incompetence as guardians, you *returned* him to them last summer, where they nearly murdered him themselves. With all of that history, you expect that he would come to you? To trust you? To believe that you can do anything at all to protect him? My goodness, I’ll be amazed if his name isn’t at the top of the list of students withdrawing over the summer.”

Albus Dumbledore sat back in his chair, wincing visibly at the deputy-headmistress' words. "You've made your point," he said after a moment. "I will be questioning the other students after they have recovered, and will make my final decision at that point."

"I would not wait too long," McGonagall warned. "I wouldn't advise taking *any* students for granted in this situation."

"Rest assured," Dumbledore replied, "I do not take Harry Potter for granted in any way. He is a bit of an enigma in some ways."

The conversation's sudden change in direction left McGonagall a little confused. "In what way?" she asked warily.

"He reminds me of another student, one who graduated before you returned to Hogwarts," he said quietly. "That one also had a group of followers who were intensely devoted to him."

Minerva's eyes narrowed as she recalled their conversation regarding the original owner of the cursed diary. "Albus you are wrong; Harry Potter is nothing at all like Tom Riddle!" She exclaimed.

"You think not?"

"No. I've watched how he acts around them," she answered. "During one of the Duelling Association meetings Miss Weasley tripped while dodging a stinging hex and hit her head as she fell. Mr. Potter went absolutely white, even though she was only disoriented for a moment. He was about to cancel the rest of the meeting when she insisted she was all right and I volunteered to accompany her to the hospital wing for a headache potion. Even then, given the promptness with which he and the others arrived to check up on her, it was obvious he'd cut the meeting short."

"So you are saying that he is as devoted to his friends as they are to him?" Professor Dumbledore asked. For some reason, his eyes were sparkling even brighter now.

"I should think that would be obvious," she replied with just a touch of asperity in her voice.



The headmaster was silent for a moment. "You have given me quite a lot to think about, Minerva. I will speak with the Slytherin students and advise you as to the results."

Professor McGonagall stood to leave, giving an apologetic nod to Professor Sinistra, who seemed relieved that the confrontation was over, at least for now.

OoOoO

"I can't believe you are taking this so calmly," Ron said as he swept up the last of the glass shards.

"He expected me to explode," Harry said with a sigh. "I'm not going to give the barmy old bastard the satisfaction of being right."

"Harry, you shouldn't call him..." Hermione began, but her voice trailed off. "Well, don't do it somewhere you can get caught," she said instead.

Harry frowned as he tapped his wand against one of the shards of glass still remaining in the frame. "*Reparo!*" he said as a now unbroken pane of glass filled the space. Technically, he was supposed to do the entire cleanup himself, but pretty much everyone shouted him down when he suggested it. Neville, Luna, and Ginny were on the ground floor at the moment. Ron recommended against splitting into more than two groups, and Harry agreed with his reasoning. With all the extra help, he was nearly done.

"McGonagall looked ready to breathe fire as we were leaving," the red-headed boy observed as Hermione vanished another small pile of broken glass.

"I'm not surprised," Harry said as he restored another pane. "The Slytherin Quidditch Team decided to make sure Gryffindor lost its Seeker for the last game of the season, and, with the Headmaster's help, they succeeded."

He scowled. He'd been hoping to discover some of the unknown Junior Death Eaters, perhaps even the one that had petrified him. Instead, they'd defeated Pansy Parkinson, Marcus Flint, and his

merry little band of Quidditch Hooligans. All of them had obvious reasons to go after him, and not an ounce of subtlety between them.

"You make it sound like he's personally out to get you," Hermione said.

"That's the way it worked out, wasn't it?" Harry observed. "Actions are what matter, not intentions." He paused and looked around. "Remember, even without Snape," he continued in a low voice, "he's the other reason you all needed to learn Occlumency."

"Harry, he's still *Albus Dumbledore*," Hermione insisted in a whisper.

"You're right. He's one and one - he got rid of Grindelwald, and then dropped the Quaffle with Voldemort," Harry spat bitterly.

"Is that why you are so angry with him?" she asked. Ron looked very uncomfortable, and Harry was reminded of how his parents were at odds with the Headmaster; because of Harry. He owed them an explanation, at least.

"Before the first war, he had suspicions about Voldemort all along, but didn't act on them until it was too late. Even aside from that, Voldemort didn't destroy the British wizarding world by himself," Harry said in a low tone. "His Death Eaters actually did nearly as much damage, because there were so many more of them. After Voldemort went poof when I was a baby, his followers all claimed they'd been coerced or enchanted. They paid huge bribes to the Ministry and were pardoned. When their Dark Lord returned in my fourth year, the core of his new army was waiting for him. Dumbledore watched them lie and buy their way out of Azkaban; he just let them do it."

"Harry," Hermione objected, "if the courts are corrupt, then what could he do?"

"He's the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, keeping the Ministry and the courts honest is supposed to be part of his job. And if the guilty evade justice, well then there are other ways to see that it is served."

"You can't just kill people because you *think* they are guilty," she insisted.

“Even if they are murders a dozen times over? Even if they’ve raped and killed so many people that *they’ve* lost count? Oh wait, most of them were Muggles, so they don’t really count, do they?” Harry asked in a sarcastic tone. He felt a stab of guilt as Hermione blanched. “To be honest, if I knew a foolproof way to do it and get away with it, I’d kill every single man who Apparated into that graveyard in Little Hangleton that night. They all claimed to be victims, but the instant they felt their Dark Marks burn, they were scrambling to get there to welcome their master back into the land of the living.”

“Harry’s right,” Ginny said, startling him. “But if he doesn’t calm down, he’s going to have to fix that window again.” Neville and Luna were staring at him, but Harry thought he saw Neville give a small nod.

Harry looked at the window he’d just finished working on. The panes were all vibrating in their frames and he realized his magic was threatening to do something uncontrolled. He took a deep breath and blew it out. The rattling died down as his temper got back under control. “Sorry,” he said quietly, crossing his arms and gripping his elbows tightly.

“You do have a right to be angry,” Ginny said quietly as she laid her hand on his forearm. “The Headmaster wasn’t being at all fair. I don’t understand why he’s bending over backwards to help the people who seem to deserve it the least.”

Harry cocked his head at her while he shrugged. “He has one serious flaw; he wants to try and coax them back to the light. It’s a laudable goal, but I think he takes it to extremes.”

“Like punishing us for being attacked,” Neville said with a scowl.

“He did say it was his preliminary decision,” Hermione reminded them, “he may change his mind after talking to the Slytherins.”

“Fat chance of that,” Harry muttered under his breath.

OoOoO

Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore was approaching a century and a half of life, but seldom did he feel as old as he did at that

moment. It wasn't a physical weariness per se, as much as a spiritual one that caused his steps to slow as he quietly slipped out of the hospital wing.

He'd waited until Friday afternoon to speak with the Slytherin students. Given that Madam Pomfrey assured him the worst of their wounds would be repaired in less than twenty four hours, it gave them plenty of time to recover and not feel like they were badgered.

Unfortunately, it seemed like it had also given them time to agree on a story. While Madam Pomfrey stated that their eardrums had fully regrown the day before, they all claimed not to hear anything, and complained of severe pain. Their 'injuries' didn't prevent them from giving a written description of their side of the story.

Mr. Flint claimed that they were trying to implement a conditioning program to improve the fitness of their players, including Ms. Parkinson who was considering trying out for Seeker next year. As they were leaving the castle they were accosted by the Gryffindors and attacked with no reason. After attempting to defend themselves from the unprovoked savagery of the younger students, led by Harry Potter, they were disabled and heavy cloaks were placed over them before the teachers arrived, to make it appear as though they had been lying in wait.

Each account was detailed and well-written, disagreeing on no major points. In fact, they were far too polished to have been produced except through collusion. When he tried to question them about the details, like why Ms. Parkinson's cloak was *under* the ropes that bound her, they indicated they were unable to hear him, and complained of blinding headaches. Checking their wands would merely confirm that they had been recently used to fire a wide variety of curses, something they already admitted to – having been 'surprised' by the violent Gryffindors.

The headmaster found their excuse for not answering his questions particularly frustrating. It wasn't uncommon for students to milk an injury or illness to get out of exams, but another day's delay in getting at the truth would be disastrous. He was sure that Professor Sinistra had told her temporary charges of the punishment levelled against Mr.

Potter, to assure them that they could feel safe at Hogwarts. Unfortunately, it seemed that they realized that feigning deafness and severe pain for another day would accomplish what Harry claimed to be their goal. Aside from the injustice of such an event, he was worried about the repercussions such an outcome would have on his rocky relationship with the boy. Harry was the key to defeating Voldemort, but it seemed like everything he did to keep the boy safe backfired or alienated him even more. Minerva warned him that the boy might leave Hogwarts if he thought he wouldn't be allowed to defend himself from attack. At first he thought it ludicrous that James and Lily's son would abandon Hogwarts, but then he remembered the real bitterness he heard in the boy's voice during that encounter just before his first Christmas at the school and began to wonder. Failing to uncover the truth in time was not something he could afford.

So it was with extreme reluctance that he began to probe the memories of Marcus Flint. The Quidditch Captain was the oldest of them, and seemed to be the leader. Legilimency was not something he enjoyed performing on students, and reserved it only for extreme situations. The Slytherin students' refusal to cooperate, delaying to ensure Harry Potter was punished, probably unjustly, was forcing his hand.

The headmaster limited his initial probe to the seventh year student's memories related to Harry Potter. Specifically, he wanted to see what his true intentions were toward the young Seeker. What he found repulsed him.

Dumbledore saw a dreamy image that he realized was the older boy's fantasized objective. He saw Harry laid out in his exercise clothes, face down on the ground. Both of his arms had been broken, with jagged shards of bone sticking out, and judging from the bloody divots taken out of the backs of his ankles, both of his Achilles tendons had been severed. It took a significant effort to not let any of his disgust show on his face.

Where had the boy learned such viciousness? Almost automatically, he began tracing the linkages to that image and saw other, related images. These, unfortunately, were far more detailed. In the first sequence, he saw the boy and his father on holiday, travelling in the

dead of night and waylaying an unsuspecting family of Muggles. After immobilizing their captives, the father and son did... unspeakable things to them, finally killing them an hour before dawn and setting a fire to conceal their crime.

It took an incredible effort to turn away from the boy without showing any more reaction than a slight frown. There was no way he could present his knowledge to the Ministry, not in any way that would be accepted in court. But he would advise certain people he knew to keep a close eye on Mr. Flint, Sr.

Hoping to find an exception, he directed his attention to Ms. Parkinson. The second year girl couldn't possibly be as hardened as young Mr. Flint. When he looked into her memories for what she hoped to accomplish the previous morning, he only received a vague impression of Harry lying on the ground, which almost aligned with their story about defending themselves from him. However, crowding this aside was a gleeful image of Ms. Granger and Ms. Weasley, their faces disfigured by jagged scars. The emotion driving these images was a desire to get even with Harry for Draco's expulsion.

With a wrench, Professor Dumbledore pulled his eyes away from the Slytherin girl and withdrew his awareness from her mind. He thanked Madam Pomfrey for her efforts and asked her to inform him the moment her patients could answer his questions. He didn't miss the small smiles the younger Slytherins attempted to conceal at his words. He had no doubts now that all of them were faking.

It was painful for him to admit, as he made his way to Professor McGonagall's classroom, but he wasn't sure he could save any of those benighted souls. They had behaved just as Harry described, seeking to maim a fellow student to assuage their wounded pride. Now that he knew the truth, he needed to mend his bridges where he could.

He'd spent more time in the hospital wing than he realized, because it appeared that the second years' transfiguration final examination was over. Mr. Weasley, Mr. Longbottom, and Ms. Granger were waiting in the hallway outside the classroom door. They eyed him coolly as he approached, and while he supposed he did not deserve a friendly

welcome, it was still uncomfortable to be so regarded by children that young.

"Harry is talking to Professor McGonagall about the DA," Ms. Granger volunteered after a moment.

"Then I think I will interrupt them for a bit," he said with a small smile, "for what I have to say needs to be heard by both of them."

With that he opened the door and entered the room, watching both occupants look up at him as he entered.

Minerva's eyes narrowed slightly, and her lips compressed into an even thinner line. She was still angry about the previous day, and he supposed she had the right to be. She was a true Gryffindor, and his preliminary decision had gone against the grain. It was Harry's reaction that was more unsettling. The boy's eyes flashed toward him as he stepped through the doorway, but then they went completely blank. They were watchful, but gave no hint of his emotions. Dumbledore didn't need his Legilimency to guess that the boy's natural Occlumency barriers were as smooth and hard as polished obsidian. With an uneasy epiphany, he realized that the boy regarded him as a threat, a potential opponent. How had things degenerated to this point?

"Harry," he said gravely. "I wish to speak to you and your head of house, if I am not interrupting."

Harry glanced over at Professor McGonagall, who nodded, a slight smile on her face. While steadfast and loyal as any Hufflepuff, Dumbledore also knew that Minerva derived an unusual degree of satisfaction from telling him "I told you so!" He sighed. In this case, she was more than justified.

Harry turned back toward him "We are at your disposal, Professor," he said formally.

"I have attempted to speak with the injured students. However, they claim to be unable to hear," Dumbledore began. Ignoring the raised eyebrow from Professor McGonagall, he continued. "In light of... *other* information, I have decided to rescind your restricted status.

You are free to play tomorrow, provided, of course, that Madam Pomfrey agrees.”

“She cleared me this morning,” Harry said thoughtfully. His eyes narrowed. “You saw something in their heads that you didn’t like.” It wasn’t really spoken as a question.

“I believe the situation was as you described, Harry,” he agreed with a slight nod. “In light of their... prolonged... disability, I’m afraid Madam Pomfrey will need to keep them in the hospital wing for further tests to ensure that there are no permanent hearing losses. Between that and making up the examinations they missed, I am afraid they will not be able to accompany their classmates on the Hogwarts Express at the end of the term.”

Harry let out a long exhalation. “That might also prevent any unpleasant confrontations on the way home. Thank you, Professor.”

Dumbledore smiled at a boy he wished he’d been able to get closer to. There were so many demands on his time, and the term seemed to pass so quickly... but those were just excuses. Harry was still a mystery in many ways, but hints from Minerva and others suggested that he did have a good heart. He could only hope to do better in the future.

OoOoO

The morning of the final Quidditch match of the season dawned bright and clear. Oliver had them up and moving quite early and Harry suspended the normal morning exercises. He also didn’t want to slip and get a black eye or a bloody nose a few hours before the match started. He didn’t put Madam Pomfrey above retracting her approval if she thought he was being reckless with his recovery.

This loud, happy, and vigorous Oliver was a pleasant contrast to the way he’d been Thursday evening. With the news of Harry’s suspension from playing, the older boy visibly sagged in his chair. Harry suggested Ginny could borrow his broom and take his place, but Oliver morosely waved that idea away. With Ginny also involved in the morning’s altercation, he doubted she’d be allowed to substitute.



Likewise, when told of Dumbledore's final decision, Harry was afraid his captain might kiss him in front of the whole of Gryffindor House.

Harry escaped that fate, but the next morning found himself trapped between his own desire not to eat much before a match and Ginny's determination that he put on some weight before holiday. They compromised on tea and toast with some bacon, and a promise to eat a hearty lunch after the match.

Ron, Ginny, and Neville, as members of the reserve squad, also suited up and joined the regular team as they marched out to the pitch. All four of them waved to Hermione and Luna in the stands, both of whom were openly carrying their wands – though Luna's was stuck behind her ear, rather like a Muggle pencil.

It was a bit odd, Harry reflected as the Ravenclaws filed onto the pitch, being in a completely friendly match. The Slytherin section of the stands was almost empty. He'd come to know Cedric and Cho better during the DA meetings. Without his crush, it was surprisingly easy to become friends with them both. He didn't know the other Ravenclaw players, but Seekers competed primarily against each other, aside from the occasional Bludger.

Still, Cho beat Cedric to the Snitch while Harry was in detention, giving Ravenclaw a close victory over Hufflepuff, despite what Ron described as a brilliant performance by the 'puff Chasers. That meant that the championship was still up in the air if Ravenclaw won today. Harry *really* wanted to nail down a Gryffindor championship for this year as well. He remembered Oliver's disappointment his first two years playing. Harry shook his head and forced his thoughts back to the here and now.

Cho grinned at him as Madam Hooch made the captains shake hands, and Harry smiled back. It was a great day to be flying, final examinations were over, Professor Dumbledore seemed to be catching on, and he felt better than he could ever remember. He glanced over at the sidelines and caught Ginny's eye. He winked, making her blush as she smiled back. At that point Harry wasn't convinced he needed a broom to fly.

When the whistle blew, he kicked off and shot into the air like a rocket. Cho followed him in a vertical climb that levelled out more than five hundred feet above the pitch.

As he circled above the now-tiny stands, Harry called out “Are you stalking me. Ms. Chang?” to his counterpart.

Cho gave him a jaunty wave. “No free shots at the Snitch on my watch, Harry.”

“If you’re going to mark me,” Harry said with a smirk, “you’re going to have to play follow the leader.” With that, he tipped his broom forward into a steep dive. He didn’t have to look back to know that Cho was hot on his heels.

With half his attention on scanning for the Snitch, Harry dove through the melee of Chasers and Beaters. He avoided three separate mid-air collisions by making minute course corrections. At his speed, the smallest deviation quickly translated into a large displacement. The plummeting Seekers made two Ravenclaw Chasers bobble a pass and Angelina snagged the Quaffle, streaking toward the Ravenclaw hoops.

Harry levelled out barely six feet above the pitch, the air screaming in his ears drowning out the cheers from the stands. He leaned closer over the broom and pushed it to go faster as he tore toward the Gryffindor hoops. For an instant he was clear of the other players, so he risked a quick glance back at his opponent.

Cho was still hanging on, eyes narrowed against the wind, and for once Harry was glad he wore glasses. He knew the Ravenclaw Seeker tended to mark him when they played – watching his reactions more than she looked for the Snitch itself. It was a strategy that normally worked quite well for her. She was a fast flyer and good at reading people. She regularly beat her opponents to the Snitch, including Cedric, much to his chagrin.

But Harry had shown he was fast as well, so she couldn’t afford to let him get too far away. She needed to be right on top of him if the Snitch appeared. Otherwise, if she was on the opposite side of Harry from the Snitch, the extra distance might be too much to make up.

Harry looped around the hoops and flew back onto the pitch. Cho stayed with him for the most part, though she took the turn a little wider. *Most* players didn't like the feeling that they were about to get torn off their broom if their grip slipped for an instant.

Harry grinned as his eyes scanned the pitch. He was rewarded with a very faint flash of gold near the Ravenclaw end. He streaked toward midfield, then pulled up the shaft of his broom and made a big show of scanning the entire field. He'd read once that one's peripheral vision was better for detecting motion, and he picked up a faint flicker again in the corner of his eye as he climbed slowly in a lazy spiral. When he was facing the Gryffindor goals, Harry's eyes widened and he mouthed "Bugger!" as he slammed the nose of his broom forward.

Cho hauled her broom into a tight turn and took off like a shot for the Gryffindor hoops.

Likewise, Harry spun and rocketed toward the Ravenclaw hoops, eyes narrowed as he sought the flash of gold he'd seen earlier. The confused shouts from the stands indicated that he'd faked out more than just Cho. He didn't take his eyes off the last place he'd seen the Snitch, but Harry wondered if she'd caught on yet. He smiled as another flash of gold wove between the posts: the Snitch.

Lips widened in a predatory grin, Harry veered toward the winged ball he saw shooting away from the Ravenclaw goals. His attention was so focused that he almost missed Angelina screaming at him. He looked up from his goal and saw a Bludger heading directly toward his face. He was too low to dive and it was already too close to dodge. His left hand seemed to rise in slow motion as the iron ball approached his skull. Madam Pomfrey was going to have a fit.

With a resounding clang, the other Bludger slammed into its counterpart, and the two sprang apart in a shower of sparks. Harry tore through the curtain of glowing motes, scattering them in his wake, and his fingers closed around the Snitch an instant later.

Harry slewed his broom into a wide and sloppy skid, pumping the fist with the Snitch in it up and down, as Madam Hooch blew her whistle, making it official. Fred and George were above him, Fred a lot farther back, both of them looking a little shaky. Angelina and Alicia were

closing in on the twins, shrieking at the tops of their lungs. Kissing someone riding a separate broomstick is a tricky proposition at best, but the Gryffindor Chasers proved up to the task.

It took a while before Oliver got everyone back on the ground for the presentation of the Quidditch Cup to Professor McGonagall. For once, Fred and George weren't acting up. Oliver waved the reserves onto the field, and Harry was glad the captain acknowledged the hard work they'd put in during practice. His thoughts were interrupted by the steely glare Ginny gave him as she marched out onto the field. Harry shrugged and gave her an apologetic smile, and she thawed a little as she lined up next to him.

Harry saw Cho standing with her team-mates, looking a bit pale. He caught her eye and she smiled ruefully, shaking her head. The stands erupted in applause as Professor Dumbledore handed the cup to Professor McGonagall.

They were back in the castle before Fred and George, the heroes of the hour, seemed to have snapped out of their daze. Harry caught the Snitch every time he played, but the Weasley twins had pulled off a one-in-a-thousand Bludger shot.

"I'm not exactly sure what I was thinking," Fred said slowly as they marched up the stairs. "I had just stopped one Bludger when Baum sent the other right at your melon. When I realized you didn't see it, I was out of position at mid-field."

"I was closer," George said, "but the angle was wrong. No way I could get it with me bat."

"I could see that too," Fred continued. "But I had this one Bludger handy, so I winged it at George."

"You put it right in my sweet spot, brother," George congratulated him. "As nice a set-up as I've ever seen."

"Not as nice as that shot you made," Fred disagreed. "I don't think I've ever seen anyone block a Bludger with a Bludger before."

“I think you were both bloody brilliant,” Ginny said with a sniff. “Just for that, I’m even going to forget about you two snooping in my room last summer.”

Fred and George stopped in mid-step.

Ron let out a low chuckle. “That’s quite a prize,” he said, “you don’t want to know what she and Harry had planned.”

Ginny hadn’t stopped moving, and Harry followed her. As he passed Ron and Neville, who had also resumed their climb, he heard Neville whisper to Ron, “What did they have planned?”

“Don’t know,” Ron whispered back without moving his lips, “but whatever it is it can’t be as bad as what they will imagine.”

Hermione bit her lip, but nonetheless looked slightly impressed.

“Sorry,” Harry murmured as he drew up alongside Ginny.

She glanced over at him and sighed. “Don’t be. You play Quidditch and you’re a Seeker – that’s just part of the game. It’s not your fault I get upset when you almost get k-killed.”

Harry reached out and took her hand, something he found easier and easier to do. “I’m sorry I didn’t pay better attention, and gave everyone a bad scare. It’s just... it was a friendly match, no one out to get me, and I was having a lot of fun. So I got a little stupid. I was so focused on faking Cho out and getting the Snitch that I lost my situational awareness.” They’d talked about that term, something he’d found in a Muggle psychology book, during their morning training sessions.

Ginny squeezed his hand. “Then it’s a good thing your *team* was there to pick up the slack, wasn’t it?”

Harry smiled ruefully at her, and she slowly returned his grin. He hadn’t anticipated that telling her everything she wanted to know would make her so serious, but he supposed it was inevitable. Harry’s anxieties about losing the people close to him seemed to

have communicated themselves to Ginny to some extent. He knew better than to think she was just concerned about the Prophecy.

Well, she'd helped him a lot with his problems. It was time to return the favour.

OoOoO

The last two weeks of term consisted of waiting for exam results and (for the older students) finishing up independent study projects, sitting special certification exams, and presentations. Hermione took advantage of the uninterrupted time to practically camp out in the Hogwarts Library. She emerged only for meals and morning training the first week, until Harry, Ron and Neville bullied her into taking a break. Ginny took advantage of the initial distraction to nick her friend's wand. Luna merely packed up Hermione's bag as the protesting girl was nearly dragged outside.

"Is there a problem here?" Professor Flitwick asked as they rounded a corner.

Hermione, a little red-faced, opened her mouth to speak but stopped. No matter how angry she was, Harry knew she wouldn't deliberately get them in trouble with a professor. He was scrambling for an explanation when Luna beat him to it.

"Our friend has been attacked by wrackspurts," the blond-haired girl replied in a dreamy voice. "There seems to be an infestation of them in the library and Hermione opened the wrong book. Now her brains have gone all fuzzy and she just wants to spend all day in the library when she could be outside in the sun with her friends."

The diminutive charms professor looked thoughtful as he stroked his tiny beard. "This sounds like a serious matter. Miss Granger, I would suggest avoiding the library until I have had time to deal with this infestation. You seem particularly susceptible to wrackspurts."

Hermione stood, frozen in place as the professor bid them good day in his high, piping voice. Harry nudged her after a moment and she began walking on her own. "Fine," she said in an aggrieved tone, "what do you want me to do?"

"I think you should hang out with your friends and get a little sun," Harry said. "You're as pale as Nearly Headless Nick, you know."

"Oliver lent me the key to the broom shed," Ron added, "I thought we all might practice a bit of flying and enjoy the weather."

Ron's tone was nonchalant, but Hermione wasn't fooled for a second. Her face reddened until Harry gave her a very direct look. He knew she wasn't very comfortable on a broom, and hadn't really flown one since last summer at The Burrow. But he'd also told her how her lack of proficiency on a broom had nearly killed her in the future, and that negated most of her objections.

The June sunshine was bright enough to make one forget how far North Hogwarts was located. The breeze blowing across the lake was refreshing enough to stay cool. In other words, it was almost perfect flying weather.

Knowing how Hermione hated being reminded of anything she was bad at, Harry watched closely as Ron pulled her aside and gave her a quick refresher. He was surprisingly patient with her, or perhaps merely afraid of her temper. In any event, he managed to correct her balance and loosened the death-grip she maintained on the shaft. All without a single harsh word passing between the two of them.

Harry was trying to balance his broom on the twigs, using just his legs to balance, when Ginny slowly flew around him. "Am I seeing things," she asked in a quiet, but clearly amused, voice.

"Not really," Harry said as he twisted his hips to keep the Nimbus from side slipping, "he's actually pretty patient... when he's too distracted to remember to get flustered."

"You're slipping, Harry," she said with a small laugh, "you almost made sense that time."

"Give him a break, Weasley," Harry replied with mock sternness, "she's his first female friend who isn't his sister, and Hermione is wired quite differently from you. That said, I'm surprised they're getting along so well."

Ginny smiled at him, and it was just a trifle smug. "Whatever you told her, it seems to have settled her down a bit."

Harry frowned as he almost overcorrected his drift. "You think so?"

Ginny nodded as she wheeled her broom back on its twigs, copying him. Only she was doing it with considerably more grace, to his annoyance. "She's more focused, less anxious about some things."

"Like whether Ron likes her or just argues with her for the hell of it?" Harry asked.

"Something like that," Ginny agreed. "You're pretty perceptive," she complimented him. "For a boy!" she added as she let her broom shaft snap forward and shot away from Harry before he could react.

Things degenerated rapidly after that, resulting in a free-wheeling game of aerial tag. Ron and Hermione even joined in toward the end, and Harry wasn't sure Ron was playing around when Hermione's free hand snagged the trailing edge of his robes.

Unfortunately, Luna didn't seem to really understand the point of the game. Ginny tried to explain it several times, but Harry almost fell off his broom when her friend asked "What if I *want* Neville to catch me?"

Overall, a good afternoon was had by all. After that, Hermione didn't require such extreme measures to persuade her to take a break from the books.

Of course, it wasn't all flying in the sun. Harry persuaded Professor McGonagall to allow them to hold nightly DA meetings, culminating in a small single-elimination mini-tournament the last Friday of the term.

The duels were limited to non-damaging spells, of course, but Harry was still eager to see the matches. Even the first year students had practiced enough to master *Expelliarmus*, and most of them could do *Stupefy* as well. With the extra training, his friends should do well, but "the proof was in the pudding" as Mrs. Weasley like to say.

Ron gulped nervously as the slip of parchment with his name came out of the jar with Cedric Diggory's.



“Keep it simple, Ron,” Harry whispered to his friend as he stood up.

Cedric, with his greater experience, had evidently been researching some spells for the tournament. As soon as McGonagall's hand dropped, the Hufflepuff cast some complex-looking spell that caused random distortions in the air between him and Ron. Ron began casting quickly; alternating stunners and disarming spells, but the distortions seemed to throw off his aim and none of them even came close to Cedric. The Hufflepuff didn't have the same problem, and his stunning spells forced Ron to duck and dodge to avoid being eliminated.

Harry saw Ron squeeze his eyes shut as he raised his wand, and looked away just as his friend yelled “*Lumos!*”

The bright flash of light that burst from the end of Ron's wand dazzled his opponent, along with most of the spectators. Ron wasted no time and charged toward his opponent.

Cedric waved his wand in Ron's direction, blinking rapidly, but his stunner flew wide of the approaching Gryffindor. Everyone seemed to be holding their breath, and the slap of Ron's trainers on the floor was the loudest sound in the room. The older student looked puzzled for a moment as Ron approached the distortion spell, but then he stepped back and a smug smile grew across his face.

Harry had to bite his tongue to avoid shouting a warning. Cedric wasn't a true enemy. Whatever that spell would do when Ron passed through it wouldn't be harmful, except to his pride.

But Ron had seen Cedric's smile as well and he dropped to the floor and skidded across the smooth stone, inches beneath the distortion spell.

Blinking owlishly, the Hufflepuff turned toward the rustle of Ron's robes as the Gryffindor cleared the distortion field. Ron quickly yelled “*Stupefy!*” and the jet of red light caught Cedric in the side, lifting him a few inches off his feet before he collapsed bonelessly to the floor. The slip of parchment with Ron's name was dropped back into the jar and Cedric's name was erased from the board as the Gryffindors applauded.

Neville had the bad luck to be paired up against Luna and very reluctantly squared off against the girl. He cast a few half-hearted *Expelliarmus* spells at Luna, who carelessly skipped aside from each one. Then she raised her wand and cast the same spell back, but with a peculiar hooking motion to her wand. The spell missed Neville by a wide margin but when it struck the chalkboard it rebounded with a peculiar cork-screw motion and struck Neville in the back.

The wand flew out of the startled boy's hand and arced toward Luna, who carefully caught it. Neville walked back to his seat, his face red. He barely looked up when Luna handed him his wand. A few students were snickering about Neville's reluctance to fight his friend, and Harry's eyes narrowed as he took note of names and faces.

As luck would have it, Harry's name came up next, along with Stephen Cornfoot, a second year Ravenclaw that joined the DA a couple of weeks after Cho. Stephen was one of those laughing at Neville's expense, so Harry was feeling less than charitable.

The sandy-haired boy was fond of shield charms, Harry remembered, and could create a fairly powerful one for someone his age. In free-for-all duels, he preferred to let his foe exhaust himself against his defences, then strike when they were winded.

Sure enough, when McGonagall's hand dropped and Harry's wand came up, Stephen had already begun the wand motion for *Protego*. Harry let him complete the incantation, and then growled "*Stupefy!*" The jet of red light that extended from the end of Harry's wand was a bit brighter than normal, as he put enough force behind the spell to overcome the strongest shield he'd ever seen Stephen cast. The barrier around the Ravenclaw fragmented and he slumped bonelessly to the ground.

Harry walked over to Stephen, *Ennervated* him, and offered the confused boy a hand up. "Need to work on that shield charm a bit," Harry said nonchalantly, then sauntered back to his seat. His remark left several people, most of whom had fought the Ravenclaw before, chuckling. At least Neville was smiling now.

Luna's name came out again a couple of duels later, this time paired against Cho Chang. Luna dodged in the boneless-appearing manner

she'd acquired when learning 'Drunken Style' Kung Fu, flopping to one side or another avoiding Cho's strikes, and at one point bending over backwards at the waist so sharply that several people winced.

After Cho's stunner skimmed past her chest with inches to spare, Luna's upper body sprang forward and she fired another disarming curse at Cho. This one hit the wall behind the Ravenclaw and rebounded toward her back, but Cho remembered the previous duel and dropped into a low crouch. Luna's spell passed over the girl's head and struck the blond-haired girl, costing Luna her wand along with the match. Harry had his suspicions though...

McGonagall called the next pair of names as soon as they left the floor. As Luna skipped back toward Harry and the rest, he saw her give Neville a smile and a shrug. "I think we both need some practice," she said as she sat down. "I don't have much planned this summer, do you?"

Neville smiled as he shook his head.

"Good, I think we need to practice sparring with *each other*," she said. "I know you won't hurt me, now we just need to convince *you* that you won't hurt me."

Neville let out a sigh and nodded.

"Good," Luna said brightly, "I was hoping you weren't going to be too much of a *boy* about it."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Ron asked warily.

"It means when you listen in on private conversations, you hear things you probably shouldn't," Ginny reminded her brother.

"How was that a private conversation?" Ron objected. "They're both sitting right here!"

"Was she talking to you?" Hermione said primly.

"Er, no," Ron said, clearly confused.

“Then it was a private conversation,” Ginny said firmly.

“Mate, I think you’re outnumbered,” Harry whispered with a grin.

“How can they-?” Ron started to ask, but subsided when McGonagall gave him a look.

The next duel pitted Hermione against an older Ravenclaw student who had enormous round glasses that made her eyes look huge. The girl wasn’t a particularly good duellist, but she seemed to have an encyclopaedic memory for spells, and she demonstrated this at every opportunity.

Oddly enough, Hermione appeared to be holding back, and stayed on the defensive, countering or dispelling those attacks she could, and side-stepping the rest. It took a couple minutes before Harry realized she was waiting to see what the older girl would come up with next.

He was about to say something when the Ravenclaw girl repeated an earlier attack and Hermione deflected it with a wave of her wand. She followed this with a lightning-quick *Expelliarmus* that caught the older girl off guard. Hermione caught the flying wand easily and stepped forward, politely handing it to her opponent. Rather than returning to her seat, the bushy-haired witch followed the Ravenclaw back to hers, sitting down next to her and conversing in quiet whispers.

“She’s absolutely mental,” Ron muttered, and Harry couldn’t completely disagree.

Ginny was the only name not picked yet by random draw, and Harry almost cringed when it came out paired with Cho Chang. He knew Ginny believed him, but he felt she still had some issues with the pretty Ravenclaw.

It didn’t help that the older girl was smiling indulgently at the red-haired witch. She had, it was true, defeated Luna, but Harry suspected Luna hadn’t really given that match her all.

Cho’s overconfidence disappeared after the first volley of spells, when Ginny bracketed her with a pair of stunners, missing her by a hair on each side. Ginny was just as fast and agile as the other girl,

but her casting was faster and more accurate. What followed was almost like a choreographed dance as each of them attacked, dodged, and counterattacked. As fast as they were, defeat would likely come to whichever of them made the first mistake, but Harry thought the odds were in Ginny's favour.

Sure enough, Cho lost her footing for an instant as she spun away from a stunner, and Ginny's follow up caught her squarely in the stomach. The Ravenclaw crumpled to the floor.

Ginny was red-faced and breathing pretty hard when she *enervated* her opponent. She quickly walked back to her seat, ducking her head down as the Gryffindors applauded. Cho seemed a little disoriented as she walked out of the circle and sat back down next to Cedric, who patted her on the back.

The random draws continued. Harry and Ron eliminated Fred and George, though he wasn't completely sure which one he'd faced. The twins accepted defeat with grace, but Harry didn't doubt they'd come up with something especially creative over the summer.

Three duels later, Hermione was partnered with Ginny. In a contest like this, where spell options were limited and speed was everything, Harry knew his Muggle-born friend was at a significant disadvantage. Still, she held on longer than he expected, and he could tell by watching that Ginny wasn't holding back either. He began thinking about ways they could work on speed and accuracy when Ron jostled his elbow.

"Wake up, Harry," Ron murmured with a grin, "time to get your arse whipped."

Harry looked up at the chalkboard with the elimination list. Three names were left: Him, Ron, and Ginny.

Harry suppressed a groan as he got up. Ron had sparred with him more than anyone else, and knew pretty much all of his moves.

The duel that followed was less of a battle and more a war of attrition. It was almost impossible for them to surprise each other, so it came down to who would tire first. Ron was a little bulkier than Harry, and

his greater strength wouldn't help here. On the other hand, three weeks ago Harry was reviving from a month-long coma, so he wasn't really in top form. Harry's greater magical reserves were of little use. Most of the spells that would leverage those reserves weren't ones he could use here, and Ron wasn't foolish enough to think he could hide behind a shield like Cornfoot. In fact, his friend relied solely on speed and agility to avoid Harry's spells.

Harry did scratch out a win in the end, but it cost him. He'd dived awkwardly to the side to avoid one of Ron's stunners. Instead of tucking and rolling to absorb the impact, he'd extended his arm and fired his own stunner back while he was in mid-air. The unexpected counterattack did catch Ron off guard, but it also meant that Harry landed hard, with all of his weight on his right shoulder. He bounced twice before skidding to a halt, all the wind knocked out of his lungs. For a moment he thought he'd dislocated it, but he was able to shift it slightly as Neville helped him sit up.

He wheezed for breath as he heard Hermione revive Ron. After a couple of minutes he stood up, being careful not to use his right arm very much.

"Mr. Potter," McGonagall asked him as he made his way to his seat, "do you wish to forfeit the next match?"

Harry looked up at the board. He and Ginny were the last two names. He glanced over at the girl, but her face was unreadable. "No, Professor," he said after a moment, "I will accept the duel."

Harry tried to flex his right arm and winced. His wand motions would be too restricted. He switched his wand to his left hand and walked back into the centre of the circle.

Ginny eyed him curiously as she made her way into the circle. He smiled at her and she grinned back. Win or lose, what was the point if they weren't going to enjoy this?

Harry was slower and a little less accurate with his left hand, but the short breather had restored his wind and he was steady on his feet. Nonetheless, Ginny was all over him, and quickly forced him onto the defensive. As he dodged a stunner that just missed his left shoulder,

he recalled that she'd been particularly focused during the morning training sessions. He was seeing the payoff now.

He dropped to one knee, letting a bolt of red light pass over his head and muttered "*Incarcerous!*" hoping to catch her legs. She leaped into the air, the spell passing harmlessly under her feet as her wand tracked downward...

Harry opened his eyes and looked up at Ginny. She bit her lower lip and Harry realized he was lying on the floor, and she'd just revived him. "Nice move, Gin-gin," he said, extending his left hand. "Help me up?"

She reached down and helped him stand. Harry picked up his wand as most of the DA erupted in applause. He grabbed Ginny's wrist and held up her wand hand and the applause became even louder, particularly from the Gryffindors.

Professor McGonagall presented Ginny with a small trophy made out of red and yellow marble, with crossed brass wands on top. With a wave of the transfiguration professor's wand, the front was engraved with the following:

***Winner, Hogwarts Duelling Association***

***1993 Spring Tournament***

***Ginevra Molly Weasley***

OoOoO

The next day was Saturday, and the Hogwarts Express was coming to take them home for holiday. Of course, no one except Hermione was completely ready to go.

The scene inside the Gryffindor second year boy's dormitory was utter chaos. Unclaimed clothes were scattered across the floor. Books were piled everywhere. And no one had remembered to set their alarm clock. Harry silently blessed Hermione for knocking on their door and waking them as he struggled with his trunk. The latch had been completely destroyed, but Hagrid had lent him a length of

rope to tie around it to hold it shut for the journey home. He'd have to either get it repaired or buy a new one over the summer.

In the end, he and Ron just threw everything into their two trunks, not really caring which one they aimed for, since they'd be sharing a room at The Burrow anyway. He did make a point of slipping the Glock out of his trunk and concealing it under his robes. Harry rolled his shoulder when they were done, wincing. He was still sore from the fall he'd taken at the tournament, but he resisted the idea of seeing Madam Pomfrey. He'd rather be sore a little while than get lectured again.

Ron levitated their trunks down the stairs, saying he was going to enjoy doing magic as long as he could. Neville muscled his trunk through the doorway, and then pulled it up onto his shoulder with disturbing ease.

Hermione, Luna, and Ginny were waiting for them in the common room, most of the other students having gone down to the courtyard to board one of the carriages. Hermione and Luna were on their feet as soon as the boys arrived, but Ginny remained on the couch, holding something under her light cloak.

Luna took Neville by the elbow, while Hermione gave Ron a *very* direct look. The four of them left while Harry looked at Ginny, raising his eyebrows.

"T-this should be yours," she said quickly, taking the DA trophy out from under her cloak. "It's n-not fair. I only won because you were hurt."

Harry shook his head. "You won because you were bloody effing brilliant," he said with a smile. "I got hurt because I was too stupid to land right. Maybe it would have been luckier for me if you'd been the one to face Ron in the semi-finals instead of me, but luck is part of tournaments as well."

Ginny shook her head. "Harry, I saw what you did in the courtyard. You could have brought the whole room down on me if you wanted to."



Harry shrugged. "Maybe, but the rules wouldn't allow it. Tournaments can be fun, but we know they aren't meant to be a full-blown combat simulation. Even if we wanted to hold one, Professor McGonagall wouldn't let us do something that dangerous with other students." He smiled at her. "Part of the challenge is figuring out how to win within the rules. And you did."

"You really aren't mad?" Ginny asked.

Harry peered at her a little closer. Ginny looked down, but Harry noted the smudged circles under her eyes, indicative of a sleepless night. "Were you really worried I'd be mad about that?"

Ginny shrugged but didn't otherwise answer.

"I'm glad, you know," Harry said.

Ginny's head came back up and she frowned, clearly puzzled.

Harry smiled again. He'd been doing that way too much lately. "Ginny, the better you are, the less likely you are to get hurt if there's a cock-up."

"You really mean that?" she asked in a small voice.

Harry suppressed the urge to frown, knowing it would be misinterpreted. Where was the confident girl he'd told all his problems to a couple of weeks ago? *I suppose we all need reassurance at times*, he mused as he put his hands on her shoulders and squeezed. "Really, Ginny. In fact, I'm looking forward to the look on your Mum's face when she sees that trophy and realizes what it's for."

Ginny let out a laugh. "Merlin, Harry, you are awful."

"You're right," Harry said. "And we're going to miss the Express if we don't hurry."

OoOoO

Harry silently blessed Dumbledore as they settled into the compartment Ron and Hermione found. The Slytherins who'd

attacked them had been confined to the hospital wing an additional week out of concern for the 'delays' they'd experienced in recovering their hearing. Then they were required to sit their remaining exams and wait for the results. Mysteriously, some of the professors involved had been particularly busy and weren't able to immediately oblige them. Sadly, this meant that they were still waiting to complete their last finals when the Hogwarts Express took their classmates back to London.

Nonetheless, Harry didn't take any chances. As soon as the train began moving, he put the strongest locking charm he could manage on the compartment door. Hermione pulled a book out of her bag and began reading while the rest of them settled down for an exploding snap marathon.

A year ago, Harry had dreaded this trip ending, knowing he'd be going back to the Dursleys. He'd had no idea that twelve months could make such a difference. This year, he was eager to be back at The Burrow with his new family. He wondered how soon he could tell the other Weasleys what was going on.

This year, the journey to King's Cross was blessedly uneventful. Harry became increasingly edgy, like he was waiting for something that was overdue. It wasn't until they were close to London that he realized Draco hadn't shown up for his end-of-term hexing.

Harry laughed out loud.

A/N:

This marks the end of Year 2.

The next chapter begins the *Harry Potter and the Dementors of Azkaban* story arc.

Yes, I know that first and second year students don't normally know stunning spells. That's one thing that the DA training is covering, for obvious reasons.

Many thanks to my Betas: Runsamok and Kokopelli.

## Chapter 29

Molly Weasley let out a quiet sigh as the Hogwarts Express pulled into the station. Her children were coming home again, at least those that still lived there. Percy would soon be making his own way in the world, and she would miss her quiet, bookish son. If he went to work at the Ministry, as seemed likely, he'd at least live close to home, maybe even stopping by for dinner at times.

She shook her head to banish her melancholy mood. Now was not the time to start missing her babies, not when she still had Percy for another year. There was even one more than she'd expected. Poor Harry was such a dear, really. For as short a time as he'd lived with them at The Burrow, it was like he'd been there forever; and so handy in the kitchen, as well. It was a little unusual to find a boy his age that not only liked to cook and was also fairly good at it. From a few comments Ron had let slip, she knew why Harry was so experienced. It was a wonder those horrible Muggles hadn't made him hate the thought of touching a frying pan.

No, Harry had proven to be handy at a lot of things, some of which were quite alarming. She understood he was very good at Quidditch, but Seekers flew so recklessly, it was a wonder any of them survived. Arthur suggested they go see one of the games, but Molly wasn't sure she would be able to stand it. He was still so small... it tore her heart to see him unconscious in the Hogwarts Hospital Wing.

That memory reminded her that he'd been hurt far worse *off* the Quidditch Pitch. To think, that a Hogwarts professor had been involved in the attempted-murder of a student! Even without knowing the victim, the thought made her ill. Considering that the plot had nearly claimed the lives of her two youngest children – for Harry was slightly younger than Ron, and she considered him as much hers as any of the rest – the very thought made her furious. Professor Dumbledore seemed reluctant to dismiss his Potions Master, but Molly Weasley was fully prepared to take him to task if he relented.

Fortunately, the plot had failed... but the way in which it was thwarted was almost worse. The thought of children facing down a Basilisk was both ludicrous and terrifying. But they'd defeated it, which was

the only reason her little girl was still alive. Arthur suspected Ginny had been given the book to discredit his Muggle Protection Act, but Molly knew a lifetime of bad blood between him and Lucius Malfoy was also a factor. For a thoughtless moment, she'd hoped Harry or one of the others would curse the cruel patriarch, but that would have led to even worse trouble. No, everyone had escaped unscathed, and that was all she could ask. Ginevra was shaken by what happened, but Madam Pomfrey said that would fade with time.

With that in mind, Molly braced herself as she looked through the crowd of disembarking students and their families. She spotted Percy first. He seemed likely to become as tall as Bill if he kept growing. Her prefect son was shouldering his way through the crowd, traces of an annoyed frown flitting over his features as he was jostled by the crowd. He'd never really been a people person. She caught his eye and he nodded and started moving toward her through the press of bodies.

"Mother," he said coolly, straightening his shirt.

"Percy?" she asked. "Where are the others?"

"I'm not sure," he answered. "I rode in the Prefects car."

Molly frowned. While her children didn't always get along, she did hope they would take care of each other, especially after such a traumatic term. She opened her mouth, but Percy seemed to have anticipated her.

"Fred and George ride with their Quidditch mates," he said quickly, "and Harry's crew usually get their own compartment."

"I see," Molly said, though she really didn't. "Did you have a good term, then?"

Percy nodded. "Examinations were about what I expected. Nothing compared to what the N.E.W.T. tests will be like, though."

"I'm sure you'll do fine," Molly said, patting his arm as her eyes scanned the crowd. "Do be a dear and help me look for your brothers."

Percy sighed and peered back across the mass of students and parents.

"They'll probably see us first," Molly said as she straightened Percy's collar, though it wasn't really that askew. "You've grown so tall."

Percy coloured slightly and Molly suppressed a grin. Things were all right with him if she could still make him blush with a little praise. She worried about him at times. He was so determined to prove himself that she wondered... but she was just being silly, really.

"Oy! Percy!" A voice called out from behind them.

Both of them jumped and turned to see Fred and George standing behind them. How had they slipped past them? Molly knew better than to ask though – they lived for the attention they received when someone wanted to know how they pulled off a prank.

Of course, Percy never seemed to have figured that out. "What are you two playing at?" he demanded.

"Well," Fred began, "George and I wanted to see if you were going to threaten the crowd if they got rowdy..."

"Sort of like how you threatened the entire Gryffindor house," George added.

"Percy did no such thing," Molly snapped. She didn't know what the twins were trying to do, but she had better things to do than listen to them wind their brother up. Did they have to start fighting before they even came home?

"Don't be so sure, Mum," Fred warned with a grin.

"Er..." Percy said in an uncomfortable tone.

"Percy?" Molly asked, more curious than anything. But the chagrined expression on her older son's face was making her start to wonder.

"Don't worry, Mum," George reassured her, elbowing his twin. "It was all in a good cause. Percy told everyone off when they got curious

about what happened to Ginny, and said that any questions would go to him and McGonagall... or else."

"I didn't say it like that," Percy objected testily.

"You didn't have to," Fred agreed. "They all got the message loud and clear though. Why do you think we skipped your normal end of term prank?"

George hissed and elbowed Fred again, but Percy was distracted by Molly giving him a very firm hug and a loud kiss on the cheek that left him beet red. "You have nothing to be ashamed of. I'm proud of you for looking out for your sister!"

"Er, right, Mum," Percy mumbled.

*Yes, he's definitely all right*, she thought. Now to look for her younger children. She was prepared for the worst, but she could deal with anything if her little girl needed help.

At least that was what she thought before she saw Harry and the others forging their way through a gap in the crowd. Something seemed... different about them. Her eyes studied Harry's face for an instant as he stopped and scanned the crowd. He'd always been such an anxious soul, the poor dear, what with all that had happened to him... but something had changed. His expression was still a bit guarded, but he looked more relaxed than she could ever remember.

Molly frowned thoughtfully as Harry turned their way. Being a mother to boys as mischievous as Fred and George had given her an advanced course in reading the faces of her young men, and her intuition was telling her that something significant had happened to Harry, aside from his 'accident'. On the other hand, she couldn't imagine what it could have been. He'd suffered a near-fatal injury, and then gone through a horrific battle, not to mention that nerve-racking confrontation in the Headmaster's office. He should have been a bundle of nerves, the poor thing.

Instead, Harry's face split into a genuine smile the moment he saw her, and he raised his hand in a carefree wave. As he led the others over, Molly couldn't help but feel like she was missing something.

Instinctively, her eyes sought out her other children. Ron was talking to his Muggle-born friend, Hermione, as they pulled their trunks through the crowd. He seemed a bit nervous, which wasn't surprising – the young woman's intelligence was a bit daunting, once you got to know her. Funny that Ron hadn't become used to it by now though.

Ginny was the one she'd been worrying about the most. After her ordeal in the chamber... having her body taken over by that awful book. The really hateful part was how someone had tricked her into thinking it was a harmless present from Harry. The boy said he'd plucked it out of her cauldron after Lucius Malfoy had dropped it in. Molly had no doubt Lucius was cruel enough to come up with the plot that finally placed the cursed diary in her daughter's hands.

That night in the hospital wing, Ginny had broken down and cried in her arms, but wouldn't really talk about it. Molly knew she was still holding something back, but she couldn't imagine anything that wouldn't pale next to what she'd just gone through. So she just hugged her daughter and then helped her change and get settled down for the night. But when she left the hospital wing, Ginny was tossing and turning restlessly in her sleep.

Looking at her daughter now was almost like looking at another person. Ginny didn't seem as carefree and excited as she'd been at the beginning of the term, but she'd also lost that haunted look Molly had first seen in Professor Dumbledore's office. She wouldn't miss that look either, but she did wonder what had banished it.

Molly Weasley felt a pang of unease as she realized that maybe her little girl was starting to grow up.

OoOoO

Harry had never been overly fond of crowds, and the terror attacks conducted by the Death Eaters during the second war had only reinforced this dislike. One or two well-placed curses would turn Platform Nine and Three-Quarters into a death-trap, and transform the crowd into a panicked mob... So it was with no small relief that he found Mrs. Weasley and the older boys near the edge of the platform.

Harry couldn't help but smile when he caught her eye. Being on the train again had awakened a lot of old memories and he'd had to remind himself that he wasn't going back to Privet Drive this summer. He waved at Mrs. Weasley to get Ron's attention and then began heading in her direction.

The others followed and Harry began reflexively tracking their positions with his ears and his peripheral vision. Ginny was closest, behind him and slightly to the left. Ron and Hermione were behind her, while Neville and Luna were trailing somewhat to his right. Harry found himself doing this more and more since the ambush in the courtyard. Perhaps those situational awareness exercises he'd picked up from a Muggle manual on small unit tactics were more effective than he'd realized. Harry wondered if the Slytherin students they'd fought had seen enough to realize what was happening. He hoped not. Better that the Death Eaters have no idea what they are about to step in when the time comes.

"Harry, you are looking so much better!" Mrs. Weasley said as she fussed over him, straightening his collar and making a determined swipe at his fringe.

Harry braced himself. "Er, thanks Mum," he said awkwardly in a quiet voice.

The next thing he knew his feet left the ground as he was seized in a hug that would have made Hagrid wheeze. By the time Mrs. Weasley put him down he was seeing a few spots. His head cleared while the tearful woman was giving Ginny the same treatment.

"You *had* to do that right here," Ron said. "I hope we're riding the Knight Bus. I don't want to see her drive in such a state."

"Ronald Bilius Weasley, if you can't say something nice," Molly began, but then she shook her head and hugged him too. Ron was looking rather ruffled when she let him go.

"What was that for?" he asked suspiciously.

"For being foolhardy enough to help Harry rescue your sister and being modest enough not to make a big deal out of it," the stout



woman said, making Ron's ears pink. "I'd like to say that goes for all of you," she continued, looking at Hermione, Neville, and Luna. "I didn't really get a chance to say this earlier. Thank you, from the bottom of my heart."

"Ginny'd do it for us," Neville said, looking a little uncomfortable. Hermione and Luna nodded in unison, which made Harry smile.

"Well, I'm very happy my children have made such good friends," Mrs. Weasley said, then paused. "All three of them," she continued with a smile.

Harry grinned and wondered if he needed to start worrying about another accidental magic discharge.

"Neville?" a stern voice called out from Harry's left.

"I'm here Gran," Neville replied.

Augusta Longbottom, looking as forbidding as ever in her long dress and tall hat, didn't so much move through the crowd as walk and expect them to get out of her way – which they did.

"There you are," she said, with just a hint of exasperation in her voice.

"Sorry," Neville said, "I didn't see you before."

Mrs. Longbottom nodded primly. "Very well, let's be off. Molly," she said, nodding toward Mrs. Weasley.

Luna, undeterred, walked up to Mrs. Longbottom and looked up at the angular woman. "Hello, Mrs. Longbottom, it's good to see you again," she said calmly and held out her hand.

Neville's grandmother didn't react, though Harry thought he saw a slight tightening around her eyes. "Neville," she snapped.

"Coming, Gran," Neville said, making a great display of turning his trunk around. But once his grandmother's back was turned to leave, he shrugged apologetically at the rest of them, looking rather confused.

Luna took advantage of the moment to step forward and give Neville a brief hug. He patted her shoulder twice with his free hand, but otherwise stood stock still. The blond girl whispered something in his ear before she let go and quickly stepped back. Neville nodded once, then hefted the end of his trunk and set off after his grandmother.

Harry gave Luna a questioning look, but she didn't say a word. It was hard to tell with her glasses, but it looked like her eyebrows were slightly drawn together. If his eyes weren't deceiving him, it would be the closest thing he'd seen to a frown on her face.

Mrs. Weasley looked a little confused, and perhaps apprehensive, about what had just happened, but she made a determined effort to change the subject. "So, Hermione, do you see your parents?"

"No, Mrs. Weasley," the brunette witch replied, "but I'm sure they are around here somewhere. Don't hold up your departure on my account."

"That's quite all right," Mrs. Weasley replied with a smile. "I wouldn't feel right leaving until I knew they were here – it just wouldn't be right. They could have been held up in some of that awful traffic or something. I don't know how people manage to deal with it every day."

"Sometimes I ask myself the same question," a voice said from behind her. Harry stopped his hand before it had done more than twitch toward his wand. He thought he recognized that voice.

Mr. Granger had worked his way through the crowd, his somewhat ruffled looking wife trailing behind.

"Mum! Dad!" Hermione said, hugging both of them enthusiastically.

"Good to see you all again," Mr. Granger said with a smile.

"I'm glad you were able to find her," Mrs. Weasley said in a slightly exasperated tone. "I swear this place gets more chaotic each year."

"Well," Mr. Granger said, "on the way over, we worked out a strategy to deal with that."

“Look for all the red-heads?” Harry asked innocently.

The older man, who Harry remembered was a dentist by trade, laughed out loud. Harry let out a chuckle as well, trying not to remember how Hermione cried when they received word her parents had been killed.

“Hermione’s written so much about you all in her letters,” Mrs. Granger said, “I almost feel like I know you all. I understand your study group gets top marks as well.”

“Sort of,” Ron said with a lop-sided smile.

Hermione spun toward him, frowning. “Ron, how can you say that? You and Harry tied for second in our class on the charms final, you came in third in transfiguration, and you beat *me* on the herbology final!”

“Only because you had an allergy attack half-way through that one and could barely see your paper!” Ron protested.

Mr. and Mrs. Granger exchanged a look as they watched the argument progress.

Harry let out a sigh. “Are you two really both arguing that the *other* got the better marks?” he asked in a despairing tone.

Ron and Hermione both paused with their mouths open. Their faces began to acquire a ‘healthy bit of colour.’

“Can you two *please* go be mental on your own time?” Harry asked in a tragic voice, laying the back of his wrist against his forehead.

That set everyone off, and by the time the laughter subsided the other parents and students were giving them a wide berth. Harry scratched his head and shrugged.

Gradually, the press of bodies began to thin as the students and their families began to leave. Mrs. Weasley seemed to enjoy chatting with the Grangers. Harry knew she wasn’t as fascinated by Muggle contrivances as her husband, but the Grangers seemed like nice,

sensible people. There was also the fact that Hermione was likely to be a guest again at some point during the summer.

Oddly enough, Mr. Granger had a few questions about magical devices, and seemed very keen on learning more about the Floo network. After Mrs. Weasley assured him that it was easy to lock down one's Floo to prevent unwanted entries, he confessed that Hermione had been after them about getting their house added to the network.

"That'll definitely make it easier to get together to work on our summer projects," Harry observed brightly.

"That reminds me," Mr. Granger said. "I have a friend who, along with his son, is really into martial arts. They visited us over winter holiday when Hermione was there. Paul was interested in learning more about who trained Hermione after watching her do some exercises. He was even more interested after his son offered to do a little friendly sparring with her and she had him pinned with a wrist-lock twenty seconds later!"

Harry let out a loud bark of laughter. "She's a bit of quick study," he said with a perfectly straight face.

"You could say that," Mr. Granger responded with a grin.

"*Daaaad*," Hermione groaned, frowning.

"Anyway," Mr. Granger concluded, "I told him she learned while she was away at boarding school. He was very disappointed though. I think if you were interested, I could introduce you. He owns a chain of martial arts schools, so I imagine he'd like to hire you for the summer."

Harry blinked. In a way, he supposed it wasn't that much different from what he did with the DA. "I'm really flattered," he finally said, "but I'm going to be tied up pretty much all summer long."

"I imagined so," Mr. Granger agreed, "but I thought you'd like to know, anyway. If you like doing it... well, it isn't often one gets a chance to be paid to do something they *like* doing."

Harry nodded thoughtfully. "I'll keep that in mind," he promised.

At her mother's prompting, Hermione was reluctantly making her goodbyes. After whispering with Ginny and Luna, she hugged Harry and Ron. She whispered a promise to Harry that she would keep in touch over the summer as much as possible, but the real surprise came after Ron's hug, when she gave the red-headed boy a quick peck on the cheek. Her face gave no hint of embarrassment when the twins snickered, but Ron's face more than made up for it. The sudden shift of attention by Mr. Granger from Harry to Ron didn't help at all.

Fortunately, Hermione and her mum led him away, in spite of his sudden reluctance to leave. Harry was fairly certain he saw Mrs. Granger swat her husband on the shoulder as they walked away.

Mrs. Weasley was also eyeing Ron, but she held her tongue on the subject for now. "Very well, I think we can head out now. Stay together everyone."

In short order, they were riding the Knight Bus toward Ottery Saint Catchpole again. Ginny hadn't said much since they left the train, but she'd walked rather close to him and made a point of sharing one of the moving bench seats with him. She also didn't seem nearly as self-conscious when the careening bus sent them sliding into each other.

"I'm having flashbacks to last year," he said in a low tone.

Ginny gave him a sharp look.

"Er, no, not what happened with the Dursleys," he quickly added. "I mean the last good part of the term. Riding the bus with you and your family."

"Your family too, now," she said softly.

"Every way but legally," he whispered. "When Dumbledore would let me leave Privet Drive and come spend the last few weeks of a summer at The Burrow... I felt like I'd been let out of jail."

Ginny peered at him again, frowning. "You know, I find myself forgetting, at times. About, you know, *everything*."

Harry nodded. "It is a lot to digest," he agreed. "I'm surprised you all didn't have me carted off to Saint Mungo's."

"I didn't say we didn't believe you, you prat," she said fondly, "It's just... you're still Harry, to us, anyway. That's all. It's hard to reconcile that with all the Boy Who Lived rubbish, let alone that *other* thing."

Harry pondered this for a moment. "You know, that has to be one of the nicest things anyone has ever said to me. Thank you."

Ginny didn't answer, but looked down at the floor as her face reddened. They shared a companionable silence through several stops, all the way to the village.

As before, Ron and Harry jumped to their feet as the bus stopped at Luna's house. They grabbed her trunk and carried it over the uneven terrain of the Lovegoods' front yard. The blond witch seemed a little more distracted than usual as she unlocked her front door. "Thank you," she finally said with a faint smile as they set her trunk down. "Do you think we will be doing any training this summer?" she asked.

"Only every day," Ron quipped.

Harry made a slightly rude noise, but let the remark pass. "It's an opportunity for us to be... ready... when the time comes, so yes."

"I'll Floo over," she said thoughtfully, "though it isn't that far to run as a warm-up, is it?"

"No," Harry agreed, "it isn't. We usually do several laps around the inside of the security perimeter at The Burrow."

"Did you invite Neville as well?" Luna asked, her gaze just a bit more focused than Harry was used to seeing.

"Of course," Harry said, but then he made a face. "I just hope his grandmother lets him come."

"Don't mention my being there," Luna said in a direct tone. "She rather violently dislikes me."

"I'm sure you just..." Ron began, but then his voice trailed off. "Okay, so maybe she does hate you," he allowed.

"Ron!" Harry said, shaking his head. "I'll try to keep quiet about that Luna, but I don't know for sure what she'll do."

"That's a first for you, isn't it? Not knowing what someone will do?" she asked.

"Not really," Harry clarified, "Not if they are in a situation I've never seen them in before."

"I see," Luna said thoughtfully. "I suppose it really is going to be up to Neville, isn't it?"

She looked a little sad, Harry thought. "Yes," he agreed, "but I think I know which way he's leaning already."

Luna nodded. "I do make him a bit uncomfortable, don't I?"

Harry made a noncommittal gesture with his hand, ignoring Ron's grin. "Maybe," he allowed, "but I think, on the whole, you make him feel better too. He's just not used to someone both liking him and being open with their feelings."

"That's just a bit sad, isn't it?" Luna asked.

Harry nodded. "Well, he was raised by his Gran after his parents were attacked. I don't think she was really ready to deal with a child again, not on a full-time basis. She's sort of reserved, but I think she does care for him. She worries about him a lot, I think."

"But why?" Luna asked. "It's not like he isn't good at things."

Harry took a deep breath. "Neville changed a lot, his first year at Hogwarts. I'm not sure you'd have recognized him if you met him before and after term. I don't think Mrs. Longbottom has completely caught on either."

"So he's spending the summer holiday with a woman who doesn't think he's any good?" Luna asked, that faint frown appearing again.

"I don't think she's that bad," Harry said quickly, "and Neville just seems to ignore her when he disagrees with her. Besides, we'll try to have him over as much as possible."

"I'd like that," Luna said. "Thank you."

"For what?" Harry asked in confusion.

"For everything that happened this year," she answered with a slight smile.

"Ah," Harry answered intelligently.

As he and Ron jogged back to the impatiently-waiting Knight Bus, Ron shook his head. "There's something else you should teach a class on, Harry."

"What's that?" Harry asked.

"How to talk to upset witches without getting hexed," Ron quipped as they climbed back on, ignoring the annoyed look Stan Shunpike gave them.

"Come on," Harry said, "it's not that hard."

"Maybe not for you," Ron said with a laugh. "*Mr. Smooth.*"

"What's not hard?" Ginny asked.

"Talking to you when you're mad about something, without getting hexed," Ron said bluntly.

"Ron, I do *not* go around -- how could you say such a thing?" she asked, fuming, reaching for her wand.

"Shouldn't listen in on private conversations, now, should you?" Ron taunted with a grin.

Harry made a point of getting out of the line of fire as he sat down. "That was well-played, Ron, but you'll likely end up regretting it later."



“Not hardly,” Ron said, plopping down on a bench near Harry and Ginny.

“Then I’d talk to Mum and volunteer to do the laundry this summer,” Harry warned in a conspiratorial whisper. “Remember what happened to Percy and his grundies.”

Ron swallowed and went pale. “I-I’ll do that, Harry,” he said in shaky voice. “Good thinking, mate.”

As Ron turned to say something to Fred, Ginny leaned over and whispered in Harry’s ear. “It’s an interesting idea, but you know I only had the one vial of defective shrinking solution.”

Harry nodded slightly. “True,” he agreed, whispering out of the corner of his mouth, “but it’s not fair for you to always get stuck with helping your mum... and I’d rather cook than do laundry.”

Ginny looked impressed in spite of herself. “That was almost Slytherin, Harry.”

Harry shrugged. “Well, fair’s fair, and I didn’t force him to do anything.”

Ginny just smiled and shook her head as the Knight Bus arrived at the path to The Burrow.

OoOoO

That evening, as they sat around the dinner table with Mr. Weasley, Harry asked a question that had been bugging him since it occurred to him on the train. “Mr. Weasley?”

“Yes, Harry?” the genial man said with a smile. He’d told Harry more than once to call him Arthur, but it still felt profoundly unnatural for him to do so.

“If Draco Malfoy was expelled from Hogwarts, why didn’t Professor Dumbledore snap his wand?” Harry asked. “They did it to Hagrid, didn’t they?”

“Ah,” Mr. Weasley said and made a face. “Well, it boils down to a couple of factors. Draco wasn’t formally charged with a crime, due to a lack of hard evidence.” He held up his hand at Mrs. Weasley’s sharp inhalation. “I know, dear. He did it. We just can’t prove it to the satisfaction of a court of law... especially not with the influence his father still wields.”

“But if he isn’t going to be trained...” Harry said, his voice trailing off.

“Well,” Mr. Weasley said with a resigned expression, “there are other magical schools he could attend. I’m not sure Beauxbatons would accept a student who’d been expelled from Hogwarts, but Durmstrang might not be as choosy... especially if there was a good bit of money involved.”

“Great,” Harry said flatly. “He’ll be attending Death Eater University.”

Molly looked a bit alarmed at that, but Percy was curious. “You’ve heard of Durmstrang?” he asked. “They have a fairly top-flight reputation in Northern Europe.”

Harry grimaced. “I’ve read up on them a bit, when I was researching all my options last year. They teach Defence against the Dark Arts at Durmstrang, only they don’t worry about the defence part. They call it ‘a progressive approach to non-traditional magic’. I call it Death Eater boot camp.”

“Er, yes,” Mr. Weasley said, “I know a retired Auror who has said much the same thing. Anyway, given their wealth, the Malfoys may just opt for a private tutor. He’s probably already got one contracted for the summer as it is.”

Harry frowned. “What good would it do to teach magic over holiday, even if Draco was still attending Hogwarts? Wouldn’t the restrictions on underage magic keep him from practicing over the summer? Or at least not in front of witnesses, right?”

Mr. Weasley actually looked embarrassed at this point. “Well, to tell the truth, there is a little-known clause in the laws regarding underage magic. If a student has an accredited teacher to supervise their

progress during the time they are away from school, they are officially exempt from the law.”

Harry stared at the man as his ears reddened slightly. “And no Muggle-born student would have the resources or knowledge to hire such a tutor, while his pureblood classmates are free to study up on the subjects they have trouble with,” Harry said slowly. “Let me guess, the Purebloods lobbied to get that rule added. No wonder Draco seemed to have improved over the summer. He was training hard to take me down.”

“I agree it isn’t exactly fair,” Mr. Weasley said, “but getting clauses like that removed... it takes a majority vote of the Wizengamot to alter or repeal an existing law, and in the current political climate that will never happen.”

Harry grimaced. “It’s one thing to agree that Muggle-hunting is barbaric, but I suppose it hits a little closer to home when it means giving up a special privilege,” he concluded bitterly.

Ron was scowling at this, but Ginny just looked thoughtful. Harry was confused for a moment, but then he guessed what she was thinking. “How do you go about filing for an exemption?” he asked.

“It’s just a form you fill out,” Mr. Weasley said, “but you have to include information on your instructor – who needs to be a professional of some sort, so Molly and I wouldn’t qualify.”

“I was thinking of someone else,” Harry said with a grin. “Would you mind if we had some ‘professional instruction’ during holiday?”

Percy was blinking rapidly, while Ron, Fred, and George looked positively aghast.

Mrs. Weasley, on the other hand, looked very uncomfortable. “Harry,” she said quietly, “that’s not a bad idea, but I’m afraid we really can’t afford to hire...”

Harry cut her off, hauling out the ‘big guns’. “Mum,” he said quietly, “this is both for my education, which my parents left money for, and for my security, which we had an agreement about. Being able to use

my wand without fearing repercussions alone is worth it. But I also have to worry about... other things. I can't really afford to slack off for three months, now can I?"

Mrs. Weasley pursed her mouth, and her eyes grew a little watery. "No Harry, I suppose not. I just wish it wasn't necessary."

"I know," Harry agreed quietly. "Me neither. But maybe this will all be over some day and we can throw a party or something."

"We'll bring the Fire Whiskey," Fred volunteered, "and lots of it."

Mrs. Weasley rounded on the twins, but when she saw their smiles, she stopped and laughed herself. "All right Harry," she agreed. "Go ahead. But I assume you have someone in mind? Do they have the credentials to satisfy the Ministry?"

Harry nodded. "They should. He'll be teaching at Hogwarts next term."

Mr. Weasley let out an approving chuckle as Harry and Ginny stood up and began clearing the dishes. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley rather conspicuously lingered in the kitchen as the others left. Ginny gave Harry a questioning look, but shrugged and left after he nodded.

After the kitchen door swung shut, Harry turned to look at his guardians. "I assume you wanted to speak about something else?" he asked.

"Yes Harry," Mr. Weasley replied as his wife put the kettle on. "Can you test our Occlumency now?"

Harry nodded and closed his eyes. He could still feel a little curiosity leaking through their shields, but when he probed at their minds, he found gratifyingly strong defences in place. "You're both almost there," he said after a moment. "I think in a week or two your minds should be completely secure."

"Harry," Mrs. Weasley said, "If Professor Snape has been dismissed, is all of this secrecy still necessary? Bill and Charlie told us that, if

anything, you'd understated how unpleasant he could be. But he's gone now, isn't he?"

Harry nodded. "But there are other people who know Legilimency, and I don't really want to trust their discretion with certain things."

Mrs. Weasley's eyes flashed, but her husband beat her to the punch. "Who are you talking about?" Mr. Weasley asked.

"Well, Professor Dumbledore, for one," Harry replied in an uncomfortable tone. "I've felt him trying to probe me a couple of times, though he didn't seem to try at all last term."

Mr. Weasley looked troubled. "This... whatever it is, it's something you want to keep secret from Albus Dumbledore?"

Harry nodded, his mind racing. He'd been hoping to delay this particular conversation, but it didn't appear he was going to get his wish. "I know how important he is, to the Ministry and to the rest of the country... but he's also the man who placed me with the Dursleys. I have no doubt that he wants to do what's right... for everyone. But I'm not sure he will do what's right for me, and I have no confidence that he will respect my wishes where I am concerned, prophecy or not."

"Harry," Mrs. Weasley said, "You are just twelve years old. It's... normal... for adults to make the necessary decisions for you." She smiled to take the sting out of her words and Harry's sense of irony drowned out any resentment they may have stirred.

"Mr. Weasley," Harry said quietly. "I understand that you and Professor Dumbledore did not agree about me coming to live here."

"That's right," the man said in a tense voice.

"Was his first thought to send me to the Diggory's or back to the Dursleys?" If the man still believed in the blood wards after the dementor attack on him and Dudley, then he already knew the answer to this question.

“He wanted to send you back, Harry,” Mr. Weasley replied, “but with measures to ensure your safety.”

Harry nodded. “And he decided this without even asking me how I felt about going back there, didn’t he?”

His guardian didn’t answer, but instead stared down at the scrubbed-wood table. He jumped a little when his wife placed a steaming cup of tea in front of him. “Harry,” he finally said. “I understand your caution, but you also need to understand our point of view. We don’t know what we are agreeing to keep secret, and that worries us.”

Harry nodded and thanked Mrs. Weasley for his tea in a quiet voice. As she settled with her own cup, he spoke up. “I understand what you mean. But I *do* trust both of you. If, after you have heard everything, you still want to go to Dumbledore, I won’t stop you. I might try to talk you out of it, but the final decision will be yours.”

Harry swallowed, wondering if he’d just read off his own death sentence. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley exchanged concerned glances. “Thank you, Harry,” Mr. Weasley said after a moment.

“Drink your tea,” Mrs. Weasley urged him.

The hot liquid soothed his throat, but Harry still felt claustrophobic, trapped.

“H-how is... our houseguest?” he asked after a moment.

“You mean that stray that followed you home?” Mr. Weasley asked after a moment.

“Yes, that one,” Harry replied. “I haven’t seen him around. Is-is he all right?”

“Well,” Mr. Weasley said carefully, “he was sick for a while, but he eventually recovered. Only once he was feeling better it was a trial to keep him penned up. You know, a big, healthy dog wants to run around and play, not stay indoors all day. A couple of months ago he took off, though I’m not exactly sure why. I imagine, now that you are home, he might come sniffing around after a while.”

“That would be nice,” Harry said with a worried smile, “I sort of miss the big fur-ball.”

“I do as well,” Mr. Weasley said, but Mrs. Weasley just snorted. “Despite what you might think, it is nice to have you back here,” he continued. “So, shall you test us again in a week?”

Harry nodded. “I can also work with you when you practice. You’re mostly there, both of you, you just have a few... gaps, I suppose. If I try to probe at those, sometimes you can feel what I’m doing and that sort of helps you close them off.”

“Really?” Mr. Weasley asked. “That’s quite interesting.”

“Hermione figured it out,” Harry added, “she’s as good a Legilimens as I am, but she makes a bit more ‘noise’ when she does it.”

“I suppose Molly and I could just join you youngsters’ practice sessions,” Mr. Weasley said eagerly. He seemed as enthusiastic about this as he did Muggle technology. Harry wondered if it was learning about something previously unknown to him that made him so excited. For a moment, Harry pictured the man as a scientist from one of the shows he’d sneaked glances of from Dudley’s telly. Or maybe a ‘mad’ scientist anyway, as mad as he was about some things.

Then what he’d said sunk in. “Er, well, we haven’t had to practice for a while,” he said.

“Then they’ve already mastered it?” Mr. Weasley asked. “Good show!”

“Harry,” Mrs. Weasley asked, eying him shrewdly, “does this mean they already know?”

Harry made a face. “Yes, it does.” He hadn’t anticipated her grilling Ron and Ginny for the details.

“Don’t worry, Harry,” Mr. Weasley said, laying his hand on his wife’s forearm. “We won’t press them to tell us, will we Molly? Harry is

showing quite a bit of trust in us, giving us the final decision. We should show the same, shouldn't we?"

Mrs. Weasley sighed. "Yes, I suppose we must, but I am not at all comfortable with all this secrecy. Harry, dear, is this really necessary?"

Harry thought about everything he was trying to prevent. He pictured her burning alive inside the inferno The Burrow had become and had to swallow back a sob that threatened to escape. He just nodded.

He hadn't said or done anything unusual, but Mrs. Weasley's face had suddenly gone pale.

"Very well, Harry," Mr. Weasley said. "We won't keep you any longer. Molly and I need to discuss some things, but you'd better escape before your friends send in a rescue party."

Harry nodded again and slid off his chair. After the somewhat closed-in feeling he'd had in the kitchen, the sitting room air felt positively cool on his hot face.

Ron was playing chess with Percy, the twins were nowhere in sight, and Ginny was sitting with a book. However, Harry noticed that her eyes were glued to the doorway, and her smile faded to a concerned look as he stepped into the room.

He gave her a wan smile as he sat on the couch and began massaging his temples. The low buzz of voices from the Wizing Wireless set was almost soothing, in a strange way, as he closed his eyes. He opened them again when he felt the couch shift. Ginny was sitting next to him, her eyes on her book. But her shoulder, resting against his arm, was a comforting presence. He let out a deep breath as his headache faded and he began to relax.

OoOoO

Of course, he had a nightmare that night. What else could happen on his first night back at The Burrow?



He sat up suddenly, biting back a scream. A quick look around verified that he was in the room he shared with Ron, and not the smoking ruins of Hogwarts. After he got his breathing under control, Harry shakily climbed to his feet. He wasn't going back to sleep any time soon, but he didn't want to wake Ron up. He crept toward the door as quietly as he could, plucking the sweat-soaked pyjamas away from his clammy skin.

He made his way down the stairs as silently as a wraith. He suppressed the sudden impulse to stop at Ginny's door. Such thoughts were beyond inappropriate, even if all he wanted was some innocent comfort.

But as he left the last flight of stairs, he sensed someone in the sitting room. He wondered if Ginny was having nightmares herself, from when she'd been temporarily possessed. He turned toward the presence, but the half-formed smile slid off his face.

He hadn't expected to find Albus Dumbledore in the Weasley's living room, glowing in the moonlight that filtered through the windows. His face was grave and instead of the usual twinkle in his eyes, his eyes reflected the glow of the waning fireplace.

"Hello, Harry," the old wizard said in a weary voice.

"Headmaster," Harry answered politely.

Dumbledore's voice grew even softer as he walked toward Harry, his face shadowed as he stepped out of the moonlight. "It took me considerable effort to realize what you had done, Harry, but in the end I was able to persuade the Sorting Hat to confirm my suspicions."

Harry's hand flashed toward the holster strapped to his forearm, but in an instant his body was frozen in place. He tried to speak, but his jaw was frozen as well.

"What you did was very foolish, Harry," the old man said, his tone more sorrowful than chiding. "I can't allow you to speak, for fear you might tell me things that I mustn't know ahead of time. You have meddled with Causality, one of the pillars of reality, and you risk unmaking everything when you do that. Harry, I understand that Tom

Riddle had been defeated... no matter what the cost, you should not have undone that. But even if you had lost, better a Dark Lord's triumph than the utter destruction your actions have risked."

Harry struggled to break the binding, much as he once had at the Astronomy Tower the night the man before him had been murdered. Though some books rattled on their shelves, it had just as little effect.

"No, Harry," Dumbledore murmured, "what you've done is beyond foolhardy. I even consulted Madam Poliakoff, one of the most skilful European Seers, a Seer who can actually control her gift. I was forced to Oblivate her afterward, but she said that she could trace the effects of your... manipulations of fate, as she called them. Every single branching she could trace ended in terrible devastation and war, with Voldemort winning in the end."

Harry's rage spiked even higher. Madam Poliakoff wasn't a Death Eater, but her son was, and she was certainly a sympathizer. After her son died at Durmstrang, she committed suicide. Her diaries revealed that she'd told Wormtail where he could find his old master, helping set the stage for that dark resurrection. He tried to open his mouth to shout this, but to no avail.

"I'm sorry, Harry," Dumbledore said, "but this is for the best. *Oblivate.*"

Harry couldn't even cringe as the greyish beam of light struck his forehead with considerable force. Only the body-binding kept him from being knocked off his feet, or collapsing as he felt the future echoes of himself die away. Harry felt like half of his mind had been ripped away and discarded as his future history was wiped clean. He knew he shouldn't even be conscious right now, but it was impossible to close his eyes as agony ripped through him.

The rattling became more pronounced and Professor Dumbledore stepped back, his eyes widening. Books flew from the shelves and the room's furnishings began to shift around, moving faster and faster. The pain in Harry's head and in his chest became even worse, making the Cruciatus Curse feel like a gentle caress. The body-bind snapped and he fell to his knees as the entire house began to rattle. His chest felt as if it were on fire, fire that was ready to explode.

In the only part of his awareness unconsumed by the fiery torment, Harry heard doors open upstairs and voices call out in fear. ‘*Get out!*’ he tried to scream, but all that escaped was an agonized moan. This pain could only be his magical core coming apart. He had no idea how closely it was bound to the memories he’d received from his future self, but without whatever piece Dumbledore had just erased, the merger wasn’t stable anymore.

He opened his mouth to try screaming again, but no air escaped his closed-off throat. He heard Ginny’s voice calling his name as he looked up.

Dumbledore was raising his wand again, but slowly. Far too slowly.

A monstrous fireball of raging magical energy consumed the Burrow and its inhabitants.

OoOoO

Ten years later, as they lay dying in the burning wreckage of the Longbottom manor house, Neville Longbottom, and his wife Hermione Granger-Longbottom held each other’s hands to give what comfort they could before the end. They’d done what they could, rallying as many allies as possible, but it was all for nothing.

The Order of the Phoenix, the Goblins, the Aurors, even the Centaurs had answered their call when Voldemort and his forces finally came to kill the *other* child of the Prophecy. They came, they fought, and they died. And now the last survivors of the ‘Gryffindor Six’ admitted to each other it was all for nothing. Only the child marked by Voldemort could spell his end, and that one had died, along with most of their dreams, when the Burrow had been destroyed by Death Eaters.

“I just wish Dumbledore had been able to arrive in time to save them,” Hermione said as her vision grew dimmer. She still held half of her broken wand in her other hand, unable to let go of the tool that had served her so faithfully, for so long. It was odd that she could feel the smooth wood in her hand, but not the shattered bones protruding from her shins.

Neville nodded, but then began coughing anew, as the blood that filled one lung began to trickle into the other. "We never had a chance," he said thickly after it subsided, "not without Harry."

Their hands tightened, saying things that words could not. A falling beam crushed them, saving them from the agony of being burned alive.

OoOoO

Harry literally threw himself out of the bed, his back arched and his limbs flailing. He only partially caught himself with his hands, and lay there for a moment, the wind knocked out of him. He scrambled to his feet, wand in his hand as he looked around. Ron was still snoring, but otherwise the room was quiet.

Harry darted toward the door, eased it open, and then slipped into the hallway. He nearly ran down the stairs, slowing only enough to keep his footfalls quiet on the risers. His wand was trembling in his hand as he carefully peered around the corner at the sitting room. It took a moment for his eyes to recognize the familiar shapes of the comfortable furniture, but once they did, his heartbeat began to slow. No old wizards with long beards, no meddling Headmasters, no well-meaning Obliviators.

But just the thought of his unleashed magic destroying The Burrow made him want to vomit. He dashed across the room, barely avoiding an end table with his shin, and opened the door to the back yard.

Once outside, he ran until he reached the far end of the garden. The grass was mercifully soft under his bare feet, so he dropped to his knees, and rolled onto his back. He stared up at the stars as his heartbeat slowed to normal and his breathing became more regular. He didn't have to look at his hands to know they were trembling.

He *knew* it had been just a dream, but it felt so *real*. He could still recall the indescribable agony as he exploded, and that detached awareness he'd had as he watched Neville and Hermione die. That horror stirred something from his future memories, perhaps from the timeless period that his awareness had passed through between the

Avada Kedavra curse and its insertion into the mind of its younger counterpart.

Was this a warning? He didn't think he was a seer, but could he be getting echoes of warnings from his future self? But that never happened the first time around, how could his future self even know about it? Maybe the accumulation of temporal energy his spirit had acquired passing through the transit field was making him sensitive to possible fates?

Harry sighed. Or maybe he was becoming hopelessly paranoid. He'd almost had a panic attack after he agreed to let Mr. and Mrs. Weasley make the final decision about telling Dumbledore. He had a very bad feeling about that, but... they have the right to make up their own minds. If he refused them that, or tried to trap them into a binding agreement, was he any better than those he opposed? He suspected his own judgment was becoming warped, distorted by his knowledge of future events. He was responding to people as they *would be*, not as they *were*.

In Neville's case, that had been a blessing. He saw what no one else could yet, and because of that, his friend was far more capable than he'd been at this point in his prior life. But with Draco he'd brought things to a head far faster than before. He didn't really think there was any way of redeeming the spoiled Malfoy heir, but it unnerved him that he'd escalated things without really intending to. It made him wonder if his judgement was distorted in other ways.

Dumbledore scared him. That much was plain. At this point, if they got into a confrontation, Harry had no doubt he would be the loser. The man had the advantage of both power and skill over him, not to mention almost unquestioned authority within Wizarding society. Harry didn't think it was so much childish jealousy that kept him at odds with the man as the fact that he couldn't predict what he would do. His portrait in the future had been *very* dubious about the whole concept of travelling back in time to 'fix' things. It was only Harry's determination and the fact that it couldn't do anything to stop him that seemed to begin breaking down resistance to the notion. His past counterpart would likely have similar motivations and no limitations.

On the other hand, being at odds with the Headmaster was also severely limiting his actions. He knew the man was becoming increasingly suspicious of him, and his reaction to the altercation with the Slytherins only underlined this. Working with the Duelling Association was a minor point in his favour, but if the man thought he was just using that to recruit followers or something...

Harry squeezed his eyes shut and muttered something that would likely get his mouth washed out by Mrs. Weasley. The old man probably thought he was trying to become another Voldemort. His close group of friends, his precocious magical knowledge, even his aggressiveness toward Malfoy and Snape, they all must have been ringing alarm bells in his mind...

"Is there a reason you're sleeping on the squash?" a voice asked.

Harry's eyes snapped open and he sat up, pointing his wand at the source of the voice, Ginny. She was wrapped up in a dressing gown and her hair was a tangled mass flowing over one shoulder. He noticed her wand protruding from her pocket.

"Watch it," she warned with a small laugh. "I did beat you in the tournament, after all."

Harry lowered his wand and smiled sheepishly.

"So why are you out here anyway?" she asked.

Harry's smile slid right off his face. He let out a sigh.

"Damn, that must have been a bad one then," she said as she sat down on the grass.

"How did you know?" he asked dully.

"Harry," she said in a tone of mild exasperation, "the clock said half past three when you hit the creaky step just below my landing. I get up and find you're in the backyard instead of your bed. When I asked you about it, you looked like I'd just kicked you in the stones, and you weren't looking too well *before* you went to bed, for that matter."

"You are too bloody clever for your own good," he said in a rueful voice.

"I *am* a girl, Harry," she said. "Do you expect me to be as thick as my brother?"

"No, not really," Harry replied. "But he is getting better, you know."

"Between you and Hermione working on him, how could he not be?" she asked in a playful tone.

Harry laughed and then let out a sigh. "Yeah, it was a bad one. Dumbledore and I got into it, and we managed to kill each other, plus all of you as part of the bargain."

Ginny let out a gasp, "Harry, how did this happen?"

With the look on her face, there was nothing Harry could do but recall all the gruesome details.

Her expression was troubled. "This isn't one of your *memories*, is it?"

"No," he replied, picking a blade of grass and rolling it up between his fingers, "this was an original bit of horror to brighten up my evening."

"Stop that," she said absently, "you're not old enough to sound sardonic without it sounding like whinging."

"Thank you, Madam Propriety," Harry said in an unctuous tone, "By the way, where *are* your shoes?"

"Hush," she said. "I'm going to go through all the reasons why this can't be real, so pay attention."

Harry frowned, but otherwise didn't say anything.

"First of all, how would he get inside The Burrow?" she asked.

"Through the Floo, or Apparating, I suppose," he answered.

"Wrong on both counts," Ginny said, shaking her head. "Remember the wards?"

"Surely your parents have keyed him in?" Harry asked.

Ginny shook her head. "No, they haven't. I overheard them discussing it at Christmas. Mum was all for it, but Dad isn't so sure. He thinks Professor Dumbledore's judgment is a little queer where you are concerned."

Harry remembered Mrs. Weasley's reactions after dinner and winced. "I bet she didn't like that," he said.

"Not one bit," Ginny confirmed. "She reminded him that Professor Dumbledore's letter of recommendation was one of the reasons he was able to get a job at the Ministry. Dad said that Weasleys weren't bought off, by anyone, and that pretty much ended the discussion right there."

"Ouch," Harry said, wincing. He hated the thought of causing an argument like that, but it was reassuring to know the dream couldn't have happened.

"It wasn't a bad row, Harry," Ginny assured him, "not like when Charlie moved to Romania. They didn't talk for nearly a week after Dad helped him move. Mum was dead set against it, but Dad said he needed to do what made him happy. I think Mum burned everything she tried to cook that week as well. Dad made a lot of sandwiches, as I recall."

Harry chuckled in spite of himself. Ginny always seemed to be able to get him out of a bad mood. "All right, I believe you. It wasn't something that could happen. Not here, anyway."

"Or anywhere else, Harry. Merlin, what about the rest of us? Five of your best friends know Occlumency, so it would be obvious that you'd told us as well. Is he going to Obliviate all of us?"

"I think he would if he thought it was necessary," Harry said darkly, "for the greater good', you know."

"Well," she said, "it wouldn't work. We'd know he'd done something. And if you want to recover a memory bad enough to risk damaging your mind, a mind healer can overcome a memory charm. At least



that's what Hermione said 'after a bit of research' at the end of the term."

"But how would you know you'd been charmed?" Harry asked, curious.

"I still keep a diary, Harry," Ginny said, looking down.

"A diary?" Harry gasped. "You wrote down what I told you? What if someone finds it? Ginny-"

"I didn't write *that*, you silly prat," Ginny said, cutting him off. "But I did leave a few clues. I re-read sections of my diary when I get bored. Suppose I read a sentence in the middle of a paragraph that says: '*If Harry doesn't remember why he has nightmares, then Dumbledore erased his memory. If you don't remember, then he did the same to you.*' Knowing what I know now, I just keep reading. But if I was Obliviated, I'd know something was wrong. Hermione has similar statements buried in her old revision guides, and Luna wrote some in the margins on old copies of The Quibbler that she's collected."

"And no one else would be able to understand the significance," Harry said slowly. "At least, not in any way that could hurt us. Ginny, that's utterly brilliant!"

She flushed. "Luna and Hermione actually came up with it," she protested.

Harry gave her a disbelieving look. "I can't believe they cooked up something that devious without any input from you."

"Well, maybe just a little," Ginny said with a smile.

Harry let out a heartfelt sigh. Even if the worst happened, all of his information wouldn't necessarily be lost forever. The part of his dream about his core exploding was probably just his imagination going into paranoid overdrive. He'd never heard of such a thing happening before, but it did make for a very dramatic ending.

He'd think back, later, on the irony of such a thought.

OoOoO

Mrs. Weasley narrowed her eyes the moment she entered her kitchen and found breakfast already well under way.

Harry looked up from the bacon he was frying. "Good morning," he said.

"Morning Mum," Ginny added as she set some flowers in a vase on the table.

She looked them up and down and Harry felt a little self-conscious in his dressing gown and bare feet. "Did you both sleep well?" she asked dubiously.

Harry decided to be blunt for a change. "Not at all," he said shaking his head.

"I've gotten used to rising early at Hogwarts," Ginny said breezily. "The showers are almost freezing if you get there too late."

"I'd think you'd want to cool off after running three miles and beating me and Neville about the head and shoulders with your feet," Harry said, laughing.

Ginny shrugged. "I'm not fond of cool water, unless I'm wearing a swimsuit."

"Are you lot still doing that?" Mrs. Weasley asked.

Harry nodded. "Every morning, which reminds me..."

"I'll go wake Ron," Ginny said with a wicked grin, "you mind the bacon. I hate it burned!"

"I'll do that," he agreed. "Don't splash any water on *my* bed!" he called after her.

"You seem very cheerful this morning," Mrs. Weasley observed.

Harry shrugged. "Ginny talked to me a little. I was a bit tetchy, at first, but she talked me down and made me realize how what I dreamed about couldn't happen."

Mrs. Weasley frowned. "What did you dream about?" she asked in a hesitant voice.

Harry sighed. "Dumbledore killing all of us, if you really wanted to know."

"Harry!" Mrs. Weasley gasped, shocked.

"It was an accident, of course," Harry continued, "but he meddled with something he should have left alone and it backfired, badly. And all of us paid the price, along with him. It was kind of disturbing."

"I should say so," Mrs. Weasley exclaimed. "Professor Dumbledore would never do something like that!"

Harry gave her a long look before he began plating up the bacon. "He might if he thought it necessary... and he has made mistakes before. You can ask him yourself, he'll be the first to admit it. I have personal knowledge of one, you might say."

"Harry," Mrs. Weasley said quietly. "I can understand some of what you are feeling, but you shouldn't let bitterness drive you in a direction you don't want to go."

Harry reigned in his first response to her words, which was anger. He could rant that *no one* could possibly understand what he'd been through, which might be true, but would also sound like typical adolescent angst. "I don't hate him," he said quietly instead. "But I don't necessarily trust him, either. And I don't think he trusts me, either."

"What makes you say that, Harry?" Mrs. Weasley asked, frowning.

Harry paused, trying to speak forcefully without sounding bitter. "He never asked where I wanted to live before he planned to stick me back at the Dursleys, and then with the Diggorys. He didn't do anything to curb Snape's excesses, until the man set me up to be

attacked and nearly murdered. Despite what he claimed about ignorance of Draco's intentions, I doubt Snape would have cried to learn that the last Potter passed away. Then, right at the end of the year, the six of us were attacked by a group of Slytherins. We successfully defended ourselves, but afterward his first reaction was to punish me, personally, even though the Slytherins threw the first curses. He finally removed me from restriction so I could fly against Ravenclaw at the last game, but I should never have been on restriction in the first place. Professor McGonagall told me she talked to him, to reassure me, but I wonder if he'd ever have come around if she hadn't said something to him. No, Mum, I don't think his first instinct is to trust me or treat me fairly at all. His first thought is that he's got to strike hard, to keep me from turning Dark like Voldemort."

"I wasn't aware it had gotten that bad," she murmured, dismayed.

"It's worse than Harry lets on," Ron said as he entered the kitchen. Harry noticed that his hair was slightly damp, and Ginny followed him in with an impish smile.

"Those snakes were out to maim or cripple him, preferably for good."

"We don't have solid proof of that," Harry said as he placed a large platter of bacon and another of fried eggs on the table.

"But you know it's true," Ron said. He smiled as he took in the steaming food laid out on the table, and then he looked at Harry, who was buttering a stack of toast. "You know, if we move out after finishing Hogwarts, I want to make sure I share a flat with *you*," he said, grinning.

"Prat," Ginny said, cuffing his shoulder, "you just want him to cook for you, as if anyone could fill a bottomless pit like that."

"What's wrong, Ginny?" Ron smirked, "Jealous?"

Despite the fact that Ron didn't know what he was talking about, Harry nonetheless wanted to hex him thoroughly. Ginny's glare seemed sufficient to boil tea with, so he concentrated on buttering the toast.

Mrs. Weasley frowned at the sudden, awkward silence.

The tension eased as Fred and George came galloping down the stairs, followed by Percy. A row was already going on between the prefect and the miscreants. Ron, of course, joined in with the twins, but Harry raised his eyebrow at Ginny and cocked his head toward Percy, who was growing steadily more red-faced as he was triple-teamed. She nodded, narrowing her eyes at Ron.

Harry distracted Fred and George, telling them that if the best prank they could manage to start off the summer consisted of glue on a doorknob, then their reputation was vastly overrated.

OoOoO

While that was happening, Ginny started in on Ron, reminding him that he shouldn't make too much fun of Percy for being a Prefect. Hermione was sure to be one when she reached her fifth year. If he didn't want her wandering around the castle at night with some strange bloke, one they might not know, he'd better ask Percy for tips on how to impress the professors.

Percy and Mrs. Weasley both blinked as the scrubbed-wood table erupted in a bedlam of voices.

"But Harry or Neville can-" Ron sputtered.

"Harry's on the outs with the Headmaster, and Neville is too nice to become a Prefect. How much do you trust Dean and Seamus, anyway?" Ginny asked slyly.

OoOoO

"We are more than capable of vastly more elaborate pranks, Mr. Potter!" Fred snapped.

"Indubitably so! Our reputations are more than earned!" George insisted.

"Deeds, not words, you uninspired bookends!" Harry thundered in a theatrical voice, but then broke down laughing.

“Uninspired Bookends?” George asked chuckling himself, “that’s pretty good, Harry. I think he could hang with Lee Jordan’s cousin, couldn’t he?”

“I think so,” Fred said, then grinned at Harry. “His cousin is a Muggle comedian, one of those blokes who gets up on a stage and tells jokes. We got to see him when we visited them at the beginning of the summer. Anyway, he loves it when someone in the audience tries to interrupt his act, because then he can tear into them. He’s actually funnier when he’s insulting someone a mile a minute, and everyone’s laughing, except the bloke getting called rude names.”

The other argument had pretty much died down by the time Fred finished his explanation. Ron was glaring down at his eggs with a red face, Ginny was looking smug, and Percy and Mrs. Weasley just looked bewildered.

The meal concluded in relative silence, and Mrs. Weasley insisted on collecting the dishes as they finished. Ginny and Ron left first, no doubt to get changed for the morning run Ron had slept through. Fred and George exchanged glances and followed them out of the room.

“What was that all about?” Percy finally asked.

“All what?” Harry asked.

“Er, what you and Ginny were doing,” Percy said.

“Oh, that,” Harry replied. “Well, three on one is hardly sporting, even if you *are* smarter, is it now?”

Harry stood up, stepped past a somewhat stunned Mrs. Weasley, rinsed off his plate and glass in the sink, and then kissed her on the cheek as he walked by her, following Ron and Ginny.

The silence behind him was thunderous as he walked toward the stairs.

A/N:

Welcome to Year 3: The Dementors of Azkaban.

Many thanks to my Betas, the comely Runsamok and the brilliant, if twisted Kokopelli! (Funny how my author notes seem to get edited, isn't it?)

Sorry for the delays, my home computer was in the shop for a couple of weeks, and it's the one I do ninety-five percent of my writing on.

I was tempted to end the chapter after the scene with Hermione and Neville dying, but I really would get tired of the death threats I'd receive if I did that. grin

Yes, reviews inspire me to write more often and for longer, and the 'meatier' the better. What did you like or dislike? What made you laugh out loud or gasp (if anything).

A couple of issues seem to pop up every so often that I will address:

Maturity level of the students: First, keep in mind that Wizarding children are born into a society where they are given access to deadly weapons at the age of *eleven*. Also, despite Wizarding life-spans, James and Lily getting married right after graduating from Hogwarts was not seen as anything unusual. Those two facts highlight that (well-adjusted) children grow up rather quickly in the Wizarding world.

Second, Harry acts more mature than his apparent age for obvious reasons. When you have a group of children when one member acts much more mature than the others, one of two things will happen. The outlier will regress to match the cohort, or the cohort will progress to meet the higher standard of behaviour. When the abnormally mature outlier is also the social dominant of that group, the second outcome becomes far more likely. This is why you see Ron and the others act more mature the longer he's been friends with Harry. (With the occasional backsliding, of course.)

Romance/shipping: Yes, I am aware of the ages of the characters. Keep in mind the points raised above regarding Wizarding society, but relax for now. Harry hasn't even definitely finished going through puberty yet. (He notices Cho Chang is pretty during the match in his third year, and that's the first strong indicator of interest from canon-Harry. It also surprised him a bit.) So, while some characters are very

aware of other characters, they haven't forgotten what age they are either.

Well, maybe in Luna's case, but she's a little odd.

For most of them, call it "good friend for now, let's wait and see what happens later on."

And of course, that doesn't mean that other parties might not make assumptions...



## Chapter 30

Things soon became rather busy at The Burrow.

Harry's owl to Remus Lupin was answered almost immediately, and the man agreed to come 'round The Burrow at lunch the following day. Mrs. Weasley insisted on the timing – she displayed a fondness for the reserved man, and never missed an opportunity to feed him. Harry found that slightly amusing, given the hints of disapproval she'd displayed regarding Sirius. He wondered how all that might change if she discovered that the two of them were Marauders – Fred and George's role models as pranksters.

"It's good to see you again, Harry," Remus said as the dishes were cleared. "But I take it you had something you wished to discuss?"

"Well, I wanted to congratulate you on your new job," Harry replied. "I'll have to get used to calling you 'Professor' now."

The man cracked a rare grin, and it seemed to subtract years from his face. "Not outside of Hogwarts, Harry."

"I'll still need to get into the habit," Harry replied with a shrug. "What would you say to fitting in a little teaching practice before you start? With a friendly audience?"

Remus chuckled. "I'll be glad to show you anything you want, Harry, but you won't be able to practice it until September."

Harry took out the partially-completed Ministry form and slid it across the table toward Remus. Harry watched his brows furrow as he read through the jargon-laced instructions. "I wasn't aware of this law," he said after he'd finished. "I take it you'd like me to sign this form?"

Harry nodded. "And teach us as well. There are 'people' out there who'd like to have me and the Weasleys out of the way, so we need to know how to defend ourselves."

Remus nodded. "Agreed, but I won't take any money for this, Harry. Your parents were very dear friends of mine, and—"

“Er, not to be a pain about it, but actually, you have to,” Harry said. He pointed at a blank on the form where the instructor’s wage was reported. “I don’t think they will approve it if you don’t. And you need to spend the money too, in ways that can be proven. I’m probably going to be put under a magnifying glass by the Ministry and anyone else who this will inconvenience. So everything needs to be completely above-board. Buy clothes, buy a new broom, buy calligraphy supplies – but keep the receipts so they can’t say you gave the money back under the table.”

Remus’ eyes narrowed. “You’ve given this a lot of thought,” he said slowly.

Harry nodded. “Last year the Malfoys sent me a box of angry Doxies for my birthday, trying to get me expelled for under-age magic use in a Muggle home. I don’t doubt they’ll be looking for any pretext to haul me up in front of the Wizengamot.”

Remus sighed heavily and Harry had to suppress a grin. “Don’t worry, I’m sure we’ll be getting our money’s worth,” he reassured the man.

“We?” Remus asked, frowning curiously.

Harry nodded. “Me, Ron, Ginny – the twins and Percy, if they want to – and Hermione, Luna, and Neville when they can make it. Call it a Defence Against the Dark Arts summer seminar.”

“Harry, I’m not sure I can teach things that everyone would find useful,” the professor-to-be objected.

“I wouldn’t be too sure of that,” Harry said with a sigh. “The last two Defence professors have been bloody awful.”

“Ah, I guess I will be starting from scratch then.”

“Not quite,” Harry said. “We’ve been practicing our spell work most mornings at school,” he explained. “We’re familiar with most of the basic hexes and jinxes, as well as some of the more advanced spells like *Stupefy*, *Incarcerous*, *Reducto*, *Diffindo*, and *Protego*.”

“All of you?” Remus asked quickly.

"Well, not Percy, and the twins miss a lot of practices, usually because they are up to something," Harry explained.

"First- and second-year students are practicing spells like that?" Remus asked incredulously.

Harry shrugged uncomfortably. "It's not like the incantations are that hard. I read them right out of the fifth- and sixth-year Defence books. It's not like a Jelly-Legs Jinx will do more than inconvenience a Death Eater."

"Really? I wouldn't think you and your friends would have the magic to cast such powerful spells. The lot of you must be very gifted."

Harry shrugged, a little embarrassed at the praise as well as for the slip. "Well, we did practice a lot. I think that helped more than anything."

"What kind of practicing?" Remus asked dubiously.

"Casting repeatedly at the edge of the Hogwarts lake to build up our power," he explained, trying not to think about the time Ron startled him and he'd accidentally cast a *Reducto* at full power, dousing them all, "or at conjured bubbles to work on accuracy. That's when Luna found out she needed glasses for distance work."

"Interesting," Remus said thoughtfully. "If you did that every morning, I can see where you'd develop your potential much more quickly than normal. Is there a reason you all are working so hard at this?" he asked quietly.

Harry sighed. "Dumbledore told me the prophecy," he said flatly. "But even before that we were having trouble with the Slytherins."

"He *told* you?" Remus asked, clearly shocked.

Harry nodded. "It wasn't like I gave him a lot of choices. Voldemort already hinted about it when I confronted him first year when we were tussling over the Philosopher's Stone. Besides, if I know what's coming I can prepare for it, rather than sit around wasting my time trying to be a normal student."

“Harry, there’s nothing wrong with having a life,” Remus said in a firm voice.

Harry sighed. “One of these days, Remus, he’ll be back. One way or another, I’m going to have to deal with him. He’s killed too many people we love already... including my mum and dad. I’ll have plenty of time for a life after I’ve sent him back to hell, where he belongs!” he said, banging the table. He’d felt his chest tightening as he spoke, and the last words left his mouth as little more than a snarl.

Remus Lupin recoiled a little when Harry’s fist thumped the wood. Then he smiled. It was a little wistful, but this time it lit up the tired-looking wizard’s face. “I’d say you inherited James’ *and* Lily’s tempers, Harry. I’ll go through my advanced lesson plans and see what I can come up with.” He quickly filled out the Ministry form, signing it with a flourish. “If we use the same hourly rate that I will draw at Hogwarts, I don’t see where anyone can complain, yes?”

Harry nodded. That remark about his parents had caught him slightly off guard.

Remus gave a sharp nod. “Right. I assume you want me to start tomorrow?”

Harry nodded again.

The shabbily-dressed man stood up from the table. “I’ll get started on a preliminary syllabus,” he said. He paused as he moved toward the fireplace, and gently placed his hand on Harry’s shoulder. “I think they’d be proud of you, Harry,” he said. “I know I am.”

OoOoO

After a somewhat shaky start, things soon fell into a routine around The Burrow. Their mornings would begin with a run around the inner boundary of the wards, followed by a solid hour of martial arts practice. Most days Luna would join them for sparring, having jogged all the way from the village. Fred and George began to join them more often, especially after Ron made some less-than-subtle hints about being able to thrash them if they pranked him again. Harry was

about to roll his eyes at his friend when he noticed Ron wearing a very self-satisfied smirk.

The idea of Ron being subtle anywhere *outside* of the chessboard felt like an utter violation of the natural order, but there it was.

Hermione's first letter after Harry invited her to the summer lessons with Remus was rather hard to read. Over the years, he'd noticed that her normally precise hand became less than neat when she was agitated. Between her indignant outrage over the law that favoured pureblood students and her excitement at the opportunity to learn new things over the summer, her reply was nearly illegible.

After talking to Mrs. Weasley, the Grangers decided to go ahead and get their home hooked up to the Floo Network, so it was much easier for her to arrive at The Burrow in time for the morning run. At the same time, her parents were less than enthused that she would be gone most of the weekdays.

Harry actually ended up Flooing over to the Grangers after their house was connected to talk to Hermione about the letter. Her parents could tell that she was working hard on more than one project, and she could tell they were feeling increasingly excluded from her life. The solution ended up being simpler than he thought it would be. They moved the early evening martial arts practice to the Granger's fenced-in back garden.

That arrangement meant a lot more Flooing around, but Harry just owl-ordered several large bags of Floo Powder for everyone to use. He wished he could buy a simple cure for the nausea and dizziness as easily as he'd just purchased the powder!

Hermione seemed to be right about her parents wanting to get to know her friends better, though her dad seemed very keen to chat with Ron in particular at every opportunity. After talking to Harry, Mr. Granger also had his friend, Paul Ishimura, come by while they were practicing.

Harry's study of the martial arts was haphazard at best. He'd learned some from the American War Mages, some from books, and some from bloody hard work. But he knew enough to notice how Mr.

Ishimura moved. The man seemed to almost glide as he walked, and his centre of gravity was always planted squarely between his feet. Harry couldn't help but feel impressed.

After watching them practice, he asked Harry who their teacher was. He didn't seem too surprised when Harry admitted they'd picked up most of it from books and self-study. "It's no reflection on you," Mr. Ishimura said, "but there are some flaws in your stances and such that a good teacher should have corrected. But if you pretty much taught yourselves, well, it's understandable. What got you interested?"

Harry explained that they had a fairly bad bullying situation at the school they attended – which was the literal truth. Luna also added in the part about the television programme she'd seen with her father, making the middle-aged Eurasian man crack a broad grin. Mr. Ishimura was quite willing to talk about his favourite subject, and in between stories about his teachers, he showed Harry quite a few things Harry and his friends could improve on.

By the time he left to go home for dinner with his family, Harry was amazed at the changes a couple of tweaks made in the strength and flexibility of his stances; something as small as turning a foot farther inward seemed to make an enormous difference. All in all, he was grateful for the pointers.

Mr. Ishimura was good friends with the Grangers, and he ended up dropping by a couple of evenings each week as they trained with his goddaughter. Occasionally, the students stayed to eat with the Grangers, and Harry and Hermione had to quietly demonstrate for their friends the intricacies of various Muggle conveniences.

After a week or so of visits, the Grangers seemed much more at ease with things, and Hermione told Harry privately that her mum didn't feel so excluded from her life.

The real capstone to the holidays was the lessons with Remus. His first class with them was spent behind The Burrow, demonstrating practically every bit of defensive magic they knew. Fred and George were far too curious to exclude themselves from the lesson, and even Percy was drawn in without much effort. All other considerations

aside, the fact that the man would be a Hogwarts professor next term carried considerable weight with Ron's fastidious older brother.

Of course, between Harry's extra training and the incompetence of Quirrell and Lockhart, even Percy wasn't that far ahead of the first- and second-year students. Harry made sure to mention within earshot that Percy had also received one of the highest Defence scores in his class. While that soothed the prefect's wounded pride, it made Remus grimace. He'd likely have a job making sure Percy and his classmates passed their N.E.W.T.s.

While Mrs. Weasley accepted Harry paying for Professor Lupin's tutorial fee, she also insisted on feeding him a substantial lunch as well. After the first session, they sat down to a generous array of sandwiches served with fruit and chips when she rather hesitantly asked how their morning had gone.

"Quite good, Mrs. Weasley," Remus replied after swallowing.

"Call me Molly, Professor," she said with a smile.

"Only if you call me Remus; every time you say 'professor' I want to look around to see who you are addressing," he replied. "I'd say that those morning practices last year were more effective than I'd have thought possible."

"I'll say," Fred said ruefully. "Ickle Gin-Gin won the Duelling Association tournament at the end of the term."

Harry winced. He'd noticed Ginny's reluctance to mention that award in front of her mother, but he hadn't pressed her about it. Fred, on the other hand, had no such compunctions about spilling the beans.

"Ginny?" Mrs. Weasley asked her daughter, who was currently glaring at her supremely unconcerned brother.

"Might as well show her," Harry suggested with what he hoped was an encouraging smile. Their... whatever it was between them was quite confusing. Some days they seemed to share the same brain, and the next day they would be awkward over inconsequential things and then be almost too embarrassed to speak with each other. He

knew quite well how his future self had felt about *that* Ginny, but for himself? This body hadn't even finished puberty yet! But *this* Ginny was even braver, and he...

Harry shook his head as Ginny returned to the kitchen with her trophy, and rather hesitantly handed it to her mum. Mrs. Weasley's eyes grew wide as she read the inscription. She looked up at the others seated at the table.

"Harry and Ron fought in the semi-final match," George explained. "Gin took Harry in the final."

"I tried to snag her legs with *Incarcerous*," Harry explained, watching Ginny. She looked like she wanted to explode and sink through the floor at the same time. "She jumped over it and Stunned me while she was still airborne. Beautiful shot, it was." He nodded and took another bite from his corned beef on rye.

Ginny let out a startled yelp as she was engulfed in a hug from her mother. "I'm very proud of you, Ginny!" Mrs. Weasley said, "In your first year, yet!"

The twins were staring at them, clearly outraged. Ron struggled to contain his laughter and Percy just shook his head.

"I'm not surprised most of you placed well," Professor Lupin said. "Not with the way you've been doing accuracy drills. Precision casting is not something emphasized in the Defence curriculum."

"It's good to know we were doing *something* more productive than scaring the fish," Ron said as he refilled his plate.

"Prat," Ginny said, but her heart wasn't really in it. She was staring as her mother set the trophy on the mantle in a place of honour – next to awards and mementos from Bill, Charlie, and Percy. Harry imagined that the twins' numerous disciplinary notices ended up *inside* the fireplace instead of on the mantle.

After lunch, Remus told them that he'd be previewing some things that might be covered in later Defence classes, but that he'd also try to include curses and techniques that were not in the standard class



work. "Frankly, your basic skills are sufficient that it would be a waste of time for me to drill you further on those," he explained. "Continue working as you have been and I'll touch on anything that needs special attention."

By the time Remus left that afternoon, Harry felt better about their preparations than he had in months. There were only two sore points: two people who were missing.

Sirius had not returned to The Burrow. There had been no announcements of his capture, and Harry couldn't imagine Fudge keeping that quiet. Announcing his capture would reassure his supporters, as well as justify pushing to have him executed before he escaped again. Harry could only assume he was still on his self-imposed mission to retrieve the Horcruxes.

The other absence was Neville. When Mrs. Weasley Flooed the Longbottoms to invite him over, she was rather coolly informed by his grandmother that he was busy. Harry'd had a bad feeling about the way she acted at Kings Cross, and it appeared he was right.

This was borne out as his friend was not allowed to attend any of the sessions for the rest of that week. As they returned from the Grangers' Friday evening, he was troubled by how quiet Luna had become. After the blond girl Flooed back to her house (she offered to jog back for exercise, but Mrs. Weasley wouldn't hear of it), Harry went up to the room he shared with Ron. Hedwig eyed him curiously as he dug some parchment out of his trunk, sat on his bed, and began writing.

*Neville,*

*Hey mate! How are you doing? Your grandmother told Mrs. Weasley you were busy all this week, but we've really missed you. Is everything all right with you? I don't want to make you feel bad, but we've got Professor Lupin, who'll be teaching Defence at Hogwarts next term, tutoring us mornings and afternoons. While he's doing that, we have an exemption to use our wands during holiday.*

*Maybe if you tell her about that, she'll let you come over. This could really give us a leg up on our classes, as well as other things.*

*Wishing you were here,*

–Harry

“Now, Hedwig,” Harry said as he rolled up the parchment. “I know you usually deliver mail in the mornings, but I’m not sure that would be a good idea with this one. Can you give it directly to Neville tonight? Or next evening, if it’s too far? And wait for him to give you a reply. Can you do that, girl?”

Hedwig just clicked her beak at him and stuck out her leg for the note. As soon as he’d secured it, she was flying out the window into the gathering gloom.

“Is that for Neville?” Ginny asked from the doorway, making him jump.

“Yeah,” Harry confirmed, “this has been going on too long.”

“It’s only a week,” Ginny said, “but still... Did you notice Luna?”

Harry nodded. “She barely said a word today.”

“Harry, she didn’t mention a single imaginary creature today. She’s really depressed.”

Harry sighed. “I know, but what else can I do?”

“Nothing really,” Ginny agreed. “So don’t beat yourself up about it. Mum sent me up because dinner will be ready soon.”

“Ah,” Harry grunted as he stood up. He smirked. “Your mum surprised you a bit, didn’t she? About the Duelling trophy?”

Ginny sighed and rolled her eyes at him. “Not really, she just waited until later to *warn* me.”

“Oh?” Harry asked.

“Yeah, she came by my room that evening for a little chat,” Ginny said shaking her head ruefully. “She warned me about how, if I was too aggressive or too skilful, it might intimidate *boys*. She didn’t tell me I should have thrown the tournament, otherwise you would have

heard an explosion, but she didn't want me to be disappointed if I kept it up and hurt my social life later on."

Harry winced. "And how did you reply to that?" he asked in a small voice.

Ginny tossed her head and used a large elastic band to tie her hair back into a loose pony-tail. "I said that any boy who'd be intimidated by that wasn't worth wasting time on. And then I told her *you* were proud of me for beating you."

Harry coughed. "I imagine that went over well."

Ginny shrugged as she turned toward the hallway. "She didn't bat an eye, so I'd say you were right, she at least considers it a possibility. But she did look at me like I was hopelessly naïve."

"Well," Harry said as he followed her down the stairs, "if I turn into a prat again as I get older, you can always hex me."

OoOoO

Their training was suspended on the weekends, mostly so they could rest, catch up on household projects, and work on whatever summer assignments they'd been given. Hermione and Luna's parents also appreciated seeing more of them, Harry imagined. The pace wasn't exactly gruelling, but their days were full. It was a little surprising that no one balked at this, but Harry supposed that his revelation in the Chamber of Secrets had given most of them a certain sense of urgency. Fred, George, and Percy probably regarded the lessons with Professor Lupin as something of a novelty. Harry had also hinted to the twins that they might learn a thing or two for their 'vocation.'

Harry still went for his morning jog that first Saturday, but his other plans fell by the wayside when he saw that Hedwig had returned from visiting Neville. He thought she looked a trifle smug as she extended her leg with a note attached.

*Dear Harry,*

*Gran is being very odd, but I'm not sure why. She says I have duties at home that I need to attend to, and won't let me leave. I'm not quite sure what these duties are since the greenhouse is immaculate, and she hasn't asked me to help around the house – not that the house-elves would let us.*

*We have had an awful lot of people dropping by, pretty much every day. Some of them are distant relatives; others are families of people Gran says she went to school with. I've never known her to be very sociable, but maybe she's making up for lost time.*

*I really wish I could be there with you. The sessions you describe sound very interesting. If Gran doesn't change her mind, I'm afraid I'll be far behind you lot when the term starts.*

*Sincerely,*

*Neville*

*PS – How did Hedwig know where my room was? She came right to me, and not the regular owl perch, which was probably a good idea, now that I think about it.*

Harry immediately started digging out some owl treats for his familiar. Rather, for his very clever familiar.

After that, Harry spent a couple of hours writing down everything he could remember Professor Lupin covering since he started working with them. When he was confident he'd got it all, and Ron and Ginny could think of nothing to add, he folded up the parchment, added a short note and sent it to Neville via Hedwig. Neither of them could think of what Neville's grandmother was playing at, but they definitely didn't want him to feel left out.

Mrs. Weasley assigned some major tasks to everyone as they ate lunch. Ron and the twins were a little boggled at the number of tasks, until she reminded them that they could now legally use their wands.

Painting the shed was more fun than work after Mr. Weasley showed them a paint spreading charm. Not that the twins didn't still manage to get more paint on each other than their assigned wall. Still, with

magic, the work went much faster. Following that with a couple of hours working with Ron in the garden, Harry had a healthy appetite for dinner.

The food was good, as always, but there was an underlying tension around the dinner table. Harry had taken a few minutes each night to probe Mr. and Mrs. Weasley's Occlumency barriers. With each session, there were fewer and fewer leaks for him to highlight. Last night there were only a few faint cracks.

Percy, on the other hand, seemed to have mastered Occlumency faster than Harry anticipated. When Harry checked his shields at dinner the previous night, they were nearly flawless. Harry wondered if the desire to know had driven Percy to work extra hard to overcome the difficulty younger minds seemed to have with Occlumency. It was possible that being at odds with much of his family made it easier for him to learn how to conceal his thoughts. Likewise, Fred and George's defences were secure before they even left Hogwarts, but Harry didn't completely trust them not to tease Percy if they knew before he did.

Of course, that also gave him an excuse to put off telling anyone else his secret.

As Harry chewed his last bite of shepherd's pie, Mr. Weasley cleared his throat. "Harry," he said, "would you mind sticking around for a moment after the table is cleared?"

He nodded and locked eyes with his guardian. Harry tried not to let any disappointment show on his face when he failed to find any flaws in his Occlumency. Instead, he smiled and nodded, then turned to Mrs. Weasley.

Hers was perfect as well. *Bugger*, he thought. *It's time.*

"We might as well all sit back down," Harry said as Fred and George began to leave. "As best I can tell, you've all mastered Occlumency."

"About time, Harry!" Fred said with a grin. "Now what's this secret all about? You make it sound like a matter of life and death..."

Harry inhaled sharply, and reminded himself that cursing Fred here and now would be somewhat counterproductive to convincing his guardians to keep his secrets.

“Both of you idiots sit down and shut up!” Ron snarled. “This is bloody serious!”

“Ron! Language!” Mrs. Weasley snapped.

“Sorry, Mum,” Ron replied, never taking his eyes off the twins. Harry didn’t think he sounded very apologetic.

Fred’s mouth was still hanging open at Ron’s ferocity, and George was looking only slightly less gob-smacked.

“Right,” Harry said in a voice that felt both too tight and too loud. “As far as I can tell, you’ve all mastered Occlumency, so you can keep secrets. I... I’d ask that you all keep your Occlumency and what I’m going to tell you to yourselves. I think when you hear what I am talking about, you will understand why.”

He frowned for a moment, wondering where to start. He felt something nudge his calf and he saw Ginny out of the corner of his eye, giving him an encouraging smile. He took a deep breath and pulled out his wand.

“This will save some time,” Harry said as he raised his wand. “I swear, upon my magic, that the secrets I will impart tonight are, to the best of my knowledge, true and factual.” Forewarned by the last oath he’d sworn in this kitchen, he squinted against the glare as his magic flared up. He knew he was tense enough that it was likely to surge again.

When he fully opened his eyes, everyone was blinking rapidly. “Harry, dear, was that really necessary?” Mrs. Weasley asked.

Harry shrugged. “What I’m going to say is sort of hard to believe. I thought that might help move things along.”

He opened his mouth to continue, but then stopped. “Are all of you familiar with what a Time-Turner does?” he finally asked.

"It's a restricted artefact," Percy replied in a dubious voice, "that allows the user to move backward in time for short jumps."

"That's right," Harry agreed, "but there are other ways to do it. Some are not as limited in how far you can go back." He noticed Arthur's eyes growing wider. Somehow he wasn't surprised that he would put it together first.

"But if that was possible, why haven't we heard about it? Or is it a Ministry secret?" Percy asked, brows furrowed.

"What if the Ministry didn't develop it?" George asked.

"Then who did?" Fred countered.

"I did," Harry said quietly. "With some help from Professor Dumbledore," he added, wary of his oath.

"Harry," Mrs. Weasley said, "I thought you were rather at odds with the Headmaster?" she asked in a hopeful voice.

"With his portrait," Harry clarified, shaking his head.

"You're mucking it up, mate," Ron said. "Just tell them like you told us."

Harry nodded. He glanced over at Ginny, who was very quiet, but seemed to be listening intently. She nodded once in agreement.

"You're right. Best to be more direct about this... In another time, there was another Harry Potter. He wasn't nearly as good in school, but he was still clever enough to make friends with Ron Weasley the first time he rode the Hogwarts Express. He had no idea that he was already a marked man, and at the end of his fourth year at Hogwarts, he was kidnapped by one of Voldemort's agents. His blood was used in a ritual to reincarnate Voldemort. This Harry eventually escaped, but not before the damage was done. While the Ministry dithered and denied that 'You-Know-Who' had returned, Voldemort built up his forces. Eventually, Voldemort struck, and there was a terrible war; it lasted for years. This Harry eventually killed Voldemort, but by then

everyone he cared about, along with more than half the British Wizarding world, was dead.”

By now, everyone’s eyes were bulging, except for Ron and Ginny. Mrs. Weasley was slowly shaking her head.

“This Harry didn’t really know what to do with himself. He was recovering from the final battle when he read a journal article regarding temporal transit fields. They were largely theoretical exercises, since nothing that had any mass could be passed through one. But Harry saw a way to use it anyway. With the help of the portrait of the late Professor Dumbledore, Harry was able to work out the equations for a transit field that could stretch back nineteen years.”

He stared down at his hands, clasped together so tightly his fingers were white from loss of circulation.

“He Apparated to the ruins of number four, Privet Drive, set up the field around himself, and then he separated his spirit from his body, allowing it to pass through the field.” He paused and swallowed. “Once in the past, his soul was attracted to the still-living analogue of its former body. The two began to merge over the space of about a day, and, after a particularly vivid nightmare, eleven-year-old Harry Potter received all the memories from his future self.”

Harry looked up. Mrs. Weasley was still slowly shaking her head, but her face had gone deathly pale. Mr. Weasley and his sons were sitting so still, it was if they’d been Petrified. “Since then, I’ve been trying to arrange things so the war doesn’t happen again,” he continued. “I was able to intercept Professor Quirrell without much trouble. This time he didn’t get his hands on me, and Ron and Hermione weren’t hurt. Other things still managed to get past me, like that ruddy diary. My older self knew Occlumency, and passed that on to me. In my first class with Snape, I discovered he was using Legilimency on me, and probably had been all along. After watching him murder Professor Dumbledore in my memories, I wasn’t about to risk him finding out the truth. I don’t want to try and imagine what the Ministry would do if they found out.”



"They'd arrest you on the spot," Percy breathed. "Tampering with the past is strictly forbidden!"

"I don't think you really understand how bad it had become," Harry whispered. "The last vestiges of the Ministry of Magic were wiped off the map more than five years before the war ended. We had *Americans* trying to reclaim Britain, and rescue the pitiful few survivors that remained; *that's* how bad it had become. The Muggles were told it was some terrible civil insurrection, but the Statute of Secrecy was wearing very thin. An American Wizarding general, chap by the name of Hastings, said it was only a matter of time before the Muggles figured everything out. The worst case scenario his superiors were considering was another war with the Muggles, one they couldn't possibly win."

"Harry?" Mr. Weasley asked, "All this... training? You're teaching our children how to fight this war?"

His guardian's voice sounded concerned, and Harry knew Mr. Weasley had to be less than enthusiastic about what he was hearing. "I want them to know how to survive," he clarified. "Voldemort galvanized his supporters with the old blood prejudices. Being Muggleborn automatically made Hermione a target. Aside from your family's relationship with me, it was no secret that the Weasleys supported Dumbledore and doing what was right. That's why you were... targeted so early in the war."

"Targeted?" Mrs. Weasley asked in a sick voice.

Harry turned toward the trembling woman and slowly nodded. "Ginny – died first; she was still attending Hogwarts when it was attacked and destroyed. Mr. Weasley was next. You should know that Lucius Malfoy has a poisoned blade concealed in that pretentious cane of his. Percy gave his life saving many of his co-workers when the Ministry building was overrun. Fred and George were lost in an attack on Diagon Alley. Bill and Charlie died striking back at Voldemort's armies. Ron... Ron was with me almost until the end, when he gave his life to save mine." Harry took a shaky breath, and something seemed to break inside him as his composure shattered. "I am *not* letting that happen this time!" he half-shouted as his eyes burned.

“Shhh... we know that Harry,” Ginny murmured. “Just don’t destroy the kitchen. It didn’t do anything to deserve it.”

Harry shook his head as he realized that the pots, pans, and dishes were all rattling in the cupboards. He took a deep breath and forced his magic back down. Within moments, the clamour subsided. “Sorry,” he muttered, hanging his head, wondering if he could have screwed this up any worse.

Mrs. Weasley’s reaction, however, was still unexpected. “Stanhope,” she said suddenly.

“What?” Harry asked.

“Your healer at Saint Mungo’s,” she said, frowning. “He spoke to me before you were released. He was concerned by the extent of your nightmares and wanted to make sure we knew what to expect. But you weren’t just dreaming about the Dursleys, were you, Harry?”

He shook his head. “I hardly ever dreamed about *them*,” he admitted. “It’s not like I really cared that much about what happened to them. You lot were more of a family to me than they ever wanted to be.”

Mrs. Weasley visibly bit back the first thing she wanted to say. “He also discussed your physical condition with us as your guardians. That secondary *corpus magi* he found... it’s not from your curse scar, is it?”

Harry shook his head. “I think I have my future self’s magic as well as his memories. My magic is stronger than I ‘remember’ it being at this age. Healer Stanhope said it would likely get stronger as I got older and the two cores finished merging. He predicted I’d keep doing accidental magic until then, and he was spot on with that.”

“So you’re going to keep this older Harry’s magic?” George asked, frowning.

“That’s a rum deal for him, isn’t it?” Fred added.

Harry paused as he groped for how to answer that.

“How *did* you, or rather he, separate his spirit from his body?” Percy asked shrewdly.

“*Avada Kedavra*,” Harry whispered, hunching his shoulders, “the Killing Curse.”

There was a moment of shocked silence, and then everyone was speaking at once. The voices all blurred together, but he could pick out expressions of shock, dismay, and horror.

Harry lurched to his feet and bolted from the room.

OoOoO

Ginny found him in the orchard, sitting under a tree. She extinguished the *Lumos* spell on her wand and sat down beside him with a sigh.

“So... how long before I need to clear out?” Harry asked. His voice was a little ragged, but he’d managed to get his emotions under control again.

“Don’t be dense,” Ginny said. “You’re missing quite a show right now.”

“What?” Harry asked. “Did they already call the Aurors?” he asked, “Or did they send for someone from St. Mungo’s?”

“Neither,” she said. “Ron would probably hex them if they even thought of touching the Floo powder right now. He’s currently tearing the rest of the family up one side and down the other.” She gave a little laugh. “I suppose he’s learned more from Mum than anyone thought, because he’s doing her Howler impression spot on.”

“You’re having me on,” Harry said.

“Not one bit,” Ginny replied. “As I was heading out the door, he was asking if he should just change his name to *Malfoy* and be done with it.”

Harry’s mouth dropped open. “That can’t have gone over well,” he said.

"It didn't," Ginny agreed. "I could still hear them past the garden." She gingerly patted his knee. "I don't think we should leave him all alone in there, do you?" she asked. "He's likely to start hexing them if they don't start listening."

Harry rose to his feet. "I'm not going to let it go that far. I didn't come here to break up your family, Ginny. If I'm not welcome at The Burrow anymore, I'll just go catch up with Sirius. Besides, if I'm out of the picture, your family might be able to avoid the worst of what's to come."

No sooner did the words leave his mouth than he found himself hopping on one foot, holding his bruised shin.

"If you will stop trying to martyr yourself for a moment," Ginny demanded, "and actually *think*, you'll know what a stupid idea that was. As if you could take off like that without the rest of us chasing you down and bringing you back! You *belong* here, Harry James Potter, and don't you forget it. Now... now get back in that house before I hex you."

Her voice went a little ragged at the end, and Harry realized she was struggling not to cry. It was too dark to clearly see her face, but he had little doubt that he'd both scared her and hurt her feelings as well. "Sorry, Gin," he muttered in a very small voice, "you're right, it was a stupid idea. I'm just... wound up... a bit right now."

She sniffed once. "I suppose you are, so I'll forgive you. But don't let it happen again."

The house was ominously quiet as they approached the back door. Harry opened it first, just in case someone cursed him. He only had it halfway open before it was pulled open and he was dragged forward off his feet. It took him a moment to realize that he'd been pulled into a very firm embrace by Mrs. Weasley and he stopping trying to grab for his wand.

"Harry, dear Harry, don't think we... it's not that..." she began. He felt her take a deep breath without slackening her grip the tiniest bit. "It's just all a lot to take in at once."

"I understand," Harry breathed and awkwardly patted her back.

She let him go, but steadied him as he stumbled. Her eyes were a bit teary, but she was smiling, at least. "Let me make some tea," she murmured and headed toward the kitchen.

Harry didn't protest as Ginny and Mr. Weasley led him back to the table.

"I think further details can wait for another day," Mr. Weasley said firmly, sending a quelling glare at the twins.

Fred was holding a wet towel to his eye; George had a split lip. Harry glanced over at Ron who looked entirely too pleased with himself.

"Harry," Mr. Weasley continued, "I assume you'd like us to not reveal this to anyone else?"

Harry nodded. "Sirius knows. The order had him studying Occlumency during the first war, because of his family."

Mr. Weasley blinked at the casual mention of the Order of the Phoenix, but Percy's outrage was far more audible. "Sirius *Black*?" he gasped.

"He made it to The Burrow during Christmas hols," Harry confirmed.

"Harry, he's an *escaped convict*," Percy half-shouted, ignoring Ron's scowl as the youngest son reached for his wand again.

"He's completely damn innocent, Percy!" Harry shouted. "He was condemned to hell on Earth in Azkaban because the Ministry *you* worship was too busy pardoning rich Death Eaters to even bother to give him a trial!"

Percy froze in place as Harry leaned across the table, utterly furious now. His own actions might be questionable, but Sirius had done nothing to deserve his fate. "Even after all that, in my old time, when he escaped, he still joined the fight against Voldemort, and he died rescuing me and some other students when we were trapped by Death Eaters within the Department of Mysteries."

"Is the Ministry that corrupt, Harry?" Mr. Weasley asked, clearly disturbed by the implications of Harry's words.

Harry nodded. "As best I can tell, every suspected Death Eater that was found 'Not Guilty' because they were allegedly under the *Imperius* curse, rejoined Voldemort the minute he returned. Lucius and his allies have their nasty little fingers in almost every department, and the Malfoys owned Fudge outright. The first year after I saw Voldemort return, the Ministry ignored him and spent all their time trying to publicly discredit me as a liar and getting Dumbledore removed from power. Fudge had to see Dumbledore fighting Voldemort *in the lobby of the Ministry Headquarters* before he would believe he'd returned. I might also add that, after Fudge was thrown out of office, you were made a *senior* department head within a week."

Harry took a deep breath. "I trust the Ministry about as far as I can spit a dead ferret."

Mr. Weasley's face had gone grim, and Harry supposed he'd done little more than confirm some of his nagging doubts. Percy, on the other hand, looked like a little boy who'd been told Christmas was cancelled.

"Anyway," Harry continued, "Sirius knows. Goldfarb at Gringotts might suspect, but I think he'll stay quiet if he does somehow guess."

"Harry," Mrs. Weasley asked, "why don't you want to get Professor Dumbledore involved? Couldn't he help a lot?"

"He could," Harry agreed. "But he might also decide that my future knowledge was dangerous and decide to remove it."

"You mean *Obliviate* you?" George asked, aghast.

"Harry! He wouldn't do that," Mrs. Weasley assured him.

"His own portrait in the future warned me it was possible. The consequences of a temporal paradox are supposed to be severe, but I haven't encountered any of them, aside from a certain tendency for things from my memory to repeat... and that may just be my

imagination.” Harry shrugged. “That’s why I think travelling back into the past has created an alternate timeline to the one my future self grew up in. That would explain why my future memories remain unchanged, no matter what I do now.”

Harry took a sip of tea to soothe his throat. “But present-day Dumbledore doesn’t know that. If he finds out, he may try to Obliviate me immediately before I can tell him too much and cause a paradox. He may not even agree that the probability that this is a parallel timeline justifies taking the risk.”

“Then why would his portrait agree to help you?” Mr. Weasley asked.

Harry looked down for a moment. “I don’t think either of us really had anything to lose at that point. I was basically the last living person he knew, and I’d been fighting repeating bouts of depression... pretty soon I would get into one that I couldn’t come back out of. It takes a lot of self-loathing to use the Killing Curse on yourself, you know.”

Harry’s eyes were riveted to his teacup, but no one had anything to say to that. “I don’t feel that way now. I mean, right now I have a chance to make sure none of this happens; maybe I can even prevent him from coming back at all. But I can remember how that other Harry felt. He’d be happier dead than being the sole survivor. The only reason he hung on until the end was to avenge everyone he’d lost.”

He looked up, almost out of reflex, when Mrs. Weasley refilled his cup. She absent-mindedly smoothed back his fringe as she poured. “I don’t really understand it though,” she murmured. “If Voldemort was gone, then he was free of everything. Why...?” She shook her head.

Harry inhaled the fragrant steam from his cup as he struggled to find the proper words. “The Weasleys were the only family either of us had known,” was all he could say. “Hogwarts and The Burrow were the only places he’d ever felt at home, and both of them were gone as well. Even without Voldemort, there was nothing left for him. Without family and home, there was nothing left to live for.” It felt better, more comfortable to refer to his future self in the third person. He didn’t know if this was caused by further integration of his personality, or if he was simply keeping the pain at arm’s length.

"Well," Mrs. Weasley said after she sat back down. "I think it would be best to involve Professor Dumbledore as early as possible. If you can explain yourself fully, I don't think he'd overreact."

Harry took a deep breath but otherwise remained silent.

"However," she continued. "I *a*lso think you need to act as you think best. It's going to be... difficult... to think of you as older. You still look like a boy to me."

"He still is, Mum," Ginny said quickly. "He honestly thought we were going to kick him out of The Burrow over this, stupid prat."

Harry cringed, but Mrs. Weasley seemed oddly comforted by that. "We'd do no such thing!" she said in a shocked voice. "There's a large difference, Harry, between being surprised and angry, though maybe you haven't seen many people that make a distinction between the two. I want you to promise that you will stop and talk to Arthur and me before you make any precipitous decisions. Is that understood?"

Though her voice was stern, Harry felt oddly relieved. This was despite the fact that he was being chewed out. He nodded.

"Good," she said. "I think maybe we should all make an early night of it? We've got a lot to think about, and everyone looks worn out."

Harry nodded and allowed himself to be shooed out of the kitchen with the others.

"Ron?" Mr. Weasley asked as they began to climb the stairs.

Harry hung back as his friend slowly turned to face his father.

"I understand why you did what you felt you needed to do," Mr. Weasley said slowly as his youngest son swallowed. "But you should understand that this was a unique occurrence. I trust that such behaviour will not occur again in the future."

"I hope not," Ron said with a grimace.



“Good lad,” Mr. Weasley said, clapping his startled son on the shoulder. “It took guts to do what you did, and I’m sure Harry appreciates that. Don’t you, Harry?”

Harry jumped guiltily, embarrassed at being caught eavesdropping. “I do. I just... don’t think it was really necessary, was it?” he asked his friend.

Ron started to open his mouth, but Mr. Weasley spoke first. “I doubt you two will ever agree on that, so it might be better to just let it lie. Now, off to bed with you!”

Neither of them spoke again until they were both settled in their beds, staring up at the ceiling.

“Thanks, mate,” Harry whispered.

“You’re welcome, Harry,” Ron answered. “Bit of a relief?”

Harry pondered the question. “It wasn’t anything like what I expected, but yes.”

“Sometimes we’re all a bit like Mum,” Ron said philosophically. “When we get surprised we say a lot of things, some of which we mean. But we don’t *do* anything until we’ve thought it through; most of the time, anyway. Saying you’d used the Killing Curse was a bit of a shocker, it’s supposed to be pretty Dark magic, from what Mum said, and Percy agreed. Saying you used it on *yourself*, well... that kind of pushed them over the top. I had to point out a few things.”

“Like what?” Harry asked, honestly confused.

“Like you did it to come back and save us all,” Ron said, turning toward him and grinning at Harry’s embarrassment. “How Ginny might already be dead now if not for you. How we’d all likely end up owing you our lives if we survive this thing. You know, little things like that.”

“How did I end up with such a manipulative wanker for a friend?” Harry asked the ceiling.

“You’re making up for a past life of sin and debauchery,” Ron answered, “at least, that’s what the twins think, anyway.”

OoOoO

Surprisingly, Harry slept without a single dream that night, and Ron actually had to wake him up in the morning for their pre-breakfast run. After drinking some water and washing his face, Harry felt unusually refreshed by his abnormally long slumber. He celebrated this fact by knocking Ron on his arse five straight times when they sparred.

“What’s got you so bloody chipper this morning?” Ron grouched as Harry gave him a hand up after his leg-sweep had sent the red-haired boy tumbling.

Ginny rolled her eyes at her brother’s intermittent clueless-ness and smiled at Harry. “Ron, what happened last night?” she asked sweetly.

“We talked about... oh, right.” He cocked his head and peered curiously at Harry. “You even tried to have a lie in today. Is it really making that big a difference?” he asked.

Harry shrugged. “I’m not going to see a single person today that I have to keep any secrets from. I don’t think I’ve been this relaxed in... years.”

“That’s good to hear,” Ron said, “even if it is a bit hard on my bum.”

“Let’s not talk about your bum, Ron,” Ginny shot back, rolling her eyes.

“All right then, what do you want to worry about now?” Ron asked with a grin.

“How about Neville?” Harry replied with a frown.

“Blimey, I wasn’t serious, Harry!” Ron objected, shaking his head.

“Well, his grandmother is acting very peculiar,” Harry said.

"Luna is upset about it too," Ginny added. "She seems to think that it's her fault."

"Do you remember his gran doing anything odd like this the, er, before?" Ron asked, a little hesitantly.

"No," Harry said, shaking his head. "But then again, I didn't know him nearly as well, so he might not have talked about it."

Ron frowned. "Well, Luna might be right, you know."

Harry nodded. "Because she's doing something she doesn't seem to have done before, and Luna's, er, friendship with Neville is new too? I suppose they might be related."

"I don't know that 'friendship' is the right word," Ron shot back.

That earned him a glare from Ginny. "I'll have you know, I think it's rather sweet!"

"That's because you're a *girl*," Ron replied, rolling his eyes. "It's like it's built in for your kind, liking mushy rot like that."

Ginny's eyes narrowed. "I think we should continue this conversation when Hermione's around, with her wand. I don't want to be the only girl sticking up for my kind."

"Don't look at me," Harry insisted, raising his hands. "I happen to think she's good for him. She drives him crazy at times, but I think he's getting used to that."

Ron gave Harry a betrayed look which he blithely ignored.

"Hedwig is able to deliver your notes to him," Ginny mused. "I wonder if Luna would like to send her own notes along with yours?"

Harry nodded. "I don't think Hedwig would mind at all."

OoOoO

After a day of relaxation and light jobs, they returned to their training with a vengeance the following Monday. Luna visibly brightened after

Harry told her about Hedwig's cleverness. The blond witch said she'd Owled Neville twice so far, but both letters had been returned unopened. The next day she handed Harry a rather thick packet of parchment. When Hedwig returned, she brought two replies, one addressed to Luna.

Two weeks later, Neville explained some of what was going on at the Longbottom manor house.

*Well, Harry, I think I know what Gran is up to, thanks to an explanation from a fifth cousin of mine, one Melinda Hawkshorne. I didn't really pick up on the fact that each set of visitors to date has included a young, unmarried female, mainly because most of them were far older than I was. The youngest was fifteen, for Merlin's sake!*

*Anyway, I'm not quite as dense as Ron, so once I realized that, I put the rest of the pieces together. I don't think Gran approves of Luna for some reason, so this promises to be a real pain this summer.*

*When I talked to her, she just said that if I was lonely, then I needed to "cultivate better companions" or something like that. I actually asked her if she thought I could find a better companion than 'The Boy Who Lived' and that put her off balance for a moment. If you suddenly felt your ears burning yesterday afternoon, I heartily apologize!*

*I don't know why she doesn't approve of Luna, because she won't say. Maybe she thinks The Quibbler is silly or something, but that seems awfully petty to me.*

*I brought up the fact that I was missing out on the tutoring sessions with the rest of you, so she went and hired one of her friends who was a tutor somewhere around the dawn of time. I don't mean to be disrespectful to Madam Esmeralda, as she does know a lot of magic, but I don't think she's been around children very much this century. She looks even older than Dumbledore, and she just sat me down and asked me what I wanted to know. At least with those outlines you sent me, I could ask her to show me something useful.*

*I'm still exercising and working on my katas, but without anyone to spar against, my timing is going to be rubbish by beginning of next*

*term. This is very frustrating. I never imagined I'd want the summer to be over so fast.*

*Your friend,*

*–Neville*

Harry restrained his first impulse, which was to Floo over to Neville's and give Augusta Longbottom a piece of his mind. Ron, Ginny, and Hermione were similarly incensed, but no one could come up with a course of action that wasn't more likely to backfire.

Luna wondered if Mrs. Longbottom might relent if she stopped coming to The Burrow, but everyone vetoed that decision. Loudly.

OoOoO

The summer wore on. Harry's birthday party was also an early celebration of his first year at The Burrow. Knowing that Neville's birthday was nearly the same day, he made a point of sending a formal invitation to his friend, but no response came back. Neville later confirmed that his grandmother made no mention of the invitation, which infuriated Harry even more.

He made an effort not to let it cast a pall over the celebration, but every time he saw Luna's sad smile, he wanted to blow up something.

Mrs. Weasley, of course, made it a far bigger production than Harry was really comfortable with... but he'd been foolish enough to answer truthfully when she'd asked how he'd spent previous birthdays, so he had no one to blame but himself.

It wasn't that bad, to be honest. She'd just invited over everyone that Harry had more than a passing acquaintance with, fed them an enormous dinner, and baked a cake that seemed larger than Hagrid. The latter, fortunately, had taken the Knight Bus to Ottery St. Catchpole, rather than Flooing into Mrs. Weasley's already-crowded kitchen.

Harry really enjoyed the dragon-hide boots that his family had clubbed up to get him. They were sturdy and surprisingly comfortable

after they contracted to conform to his feet. Harry thought the glossy dark hide looked very smart with the blackened metal fittings.

He was, however, secretly glad that they hadn't bought him a bunch of expensive presents. He was a little surprised that Mr. Weasley *didn't* win this year's *Daily Prophet* Galleon Draw, but he supposed his presence had changed things enough that his guardian bought a different ticket this time. Of course, Bill was in Hong Kong at the moment, still working with Carpenter, Fitz-Willis, and Holmes, who were improving the wards around specific hidden areas of the British Consulate. Mrs. Weasley was happy at her eldest son's success, but not so pleased at how far away from home his new job took him. Errol was definitely not up to carrying responses halfway around the world, so Harry volunteered Hedwig. She'd given him a long withering look when he asked if she could fly to China. Evidently, according to Hedwig's view of the world, he shouldn't question her abilities.

Harry wondered if the Weasley trip to Egypt was just something that Fate didn't really care about, or if the parallels were breaking down as the time lines diverged. It wasn't a question he'd be able to really answer until after the fact, but that didn't stop him from brooding over it. Only Hermione seemed to enjoy pondering such things for extended periods of time, and after hours of circular, inconclusive internal debates, Harry determined that she was welcome to them.

But all in all, the birthday celebration turned out to be a very fun day. He was a little shocked when Professor McGonagall arrived. She wished him a happy birthday and then handed him a very thick sheaf of parchment. Harry paged through it, puzzled.

"I've prepared notes for the Duelling Association curriculum, Mr. Potter," she explained. "As you have older students expressing some interest, I've taken the liberty of breaking down some of the topics and referencing at what point in the year students of various years will have the necessary background knowledge to perform various exercises. As you can imagine, not everyone will be ready for some of the topics you may be prepared to cover next term." She actually smiled at that point. "I was made aware of your holiday arrangements. I commend all of you on your industriousness, and I expect to see great things from my Gryffindors next term."

Ron's face looked a bit green, but Harry just smiled up at her.

Harry slipped away after dinner and took a walk around the property in his new boots. It had been a fun, albeit exhausting, day and it felt good to unwind a bit. He also found his thoughts drifting back to an uncomfortable topic.

He'd been fairly certain that Sirius would have made it back to The Burrow by now. His godfather certainly knew his birthday, and Harry didn't think that gathering up the Horcruxes would be able to keep him away.

Unless he was in trouble.

Harry paced through the orchard, trying to organize his thoughts. While a small, childish part of him wanted Sirius to be there, he was more concerned about the implications of his absence. It was true that Sirius' mission was far more important than a stupid birthday party, but it seemed almost out of character for him to exercise that degree of restraint. It was also possible that Sirius was hiding out somewhere, unaware of the date. Perhaps he'd been delayed while travelling.

There were a lot of variables, Harry reminded himself, and there wasn't a lot he could do about it anyway. Except, perhaps, walking in the twilight and glaring at innocent trees.

Harry sighed aloud at his foolishness and turned to head back to The Burrow when he heard a distant baying that raised the hairs along the back of his neck.

He spun toward the south-eastern corner of the property, the direction the sound seemed to be coming from. It was probably just a local farmer's dog, but that didn't stop Harry from sprinting toward the sound.

Harry dove around the slate-grey stone hut that marked the corner of the Weasleys' land, ignoring the tingle across his skin as he passed through the wards. A couple of minutes later he emerged from the woods and slipped past a tumbled-down stone wall into an overgrown pasture.

The baying had stopped, but his instincts drove Harry to continue on in the direction it had come from. Something dark burst from the trees on the opposite edge of the pasture, loping toward him. Harry let out a sigh of relief as the crescent moon shed enough light to reveal the outlines of a very familiar, very large, black dog.

But then he stiffened as a chill ran down his spine. The dog's eyes were rolling wildly in their sockets and the black muzzle was flecked with foam. Its gait was uneven and its flanks heaved as though it were out of breath. In the back of his mind, Harry could hear the faint double-echo of a woman screaming. Harry felt his hands tremble as his whole body felt like it had been dunked in ice-water as the evening sky grew darker.

Under the trees on the opposite side of the pasture, a host of dark cloaked figures surged out into the dimming moonlight.

A/N:

Welcome to Year 3: The Dementors of Azkaban.

Many thanks to my *witty, diligent, and very personable* Betas: Runsamok, Kokopelli, and Sherylyn!

If you have any questions about this, or any of my other stories, you can check out my Yahoo group, Viridian Dreams. (The link is in my profile.)

Once the training schedule has been set up, I'm not going to spend tremendous amounts of time detailing every topic covered. Rest assured that, among other things, they are getting a lot of practice with their wands. This will build up their accuracy and timing, as well as speeding increases in their magical power. This is a natural extension of the morning training they've been all been doing since the beginning of last term (or longer in some cases).

Note: When a dog has been running at top speed for extended periods of time, it will get little bits of foam around its muzzle. Sirius is *not* rabid.



## Chapter 31

Harry's stomach lurched as a small horde of Dementors surged out of the woods. His hand reached toward his wand, but he knew it would likely be futile. There were too many of them, and they could come at him from too many angles.

Then he remembered the wards.

Harry dashed forward, ignoring the faint screams bubbling up from his memories. His Occlumency barriers were, at best, slowing down the effects of the Dementors, but he couldn't count on them for long.

The huge black dog was almost oblivious to his presence until Harry grabbed the fur on the back of his neck and began hauling on it. He supposed he should be glad the presence of his godfather's mind kept the dazed animal from snapping at his hands as he half-dragged him back the way he'd come. He could feel the animal shivering fiercely through the thick fur.

Harry had no idea how closely they were followed as they scrambled through the overgrown woods. He didn't dare waste a moment to look back over his shoulder as they staggered around trees and crashed through lesser vegetation. Surely the underbrush wasn't this thick going the other way.

His best gauge was the chilling presence the mass of Dementors were having on his mind and body. He could feel the barriers around his mind rime with ice and grow brittle under the influence of the unwholesome creatures. Their very presence sought to suck the joy out of any nearby mortals, leaving them with only the worst of their memories echoing through their minds.

And Harry had a lot of bad memories aching to be set free.

The faint sound of screaming voices became louder and louder, threatening to drown out the rapid pulse of his heart. Harry wondered if he should have spared the time to fire off a Patronus and hope it delayed them for a few moments. As spread out as they were, he doubted it would have worked.

Fortunately, Sirius was starting to recover. Harry's touch seemed to have reawakened his awareness of their situation, and now his steps grew steadier. Instead of Harry half-dragging his godfather, the Animagus was surging ahead, pulling Harry along by the grip he still had on the loose skin on his neck.

"More to the right," Harry gasped as he recognized the tree they'd just passed, despite the frost that frosted the bark. He could hear the bushes behind them break off as their pursuers closed in on them. The air grew chill and the springiest vegetation became frail and brittle wherever Dementors approached.

Against his will, Harry felt his mind drifting back to the aftermath of the Hogwarts Massacre. No matter how hard he blinked, he'd see Ginny's red hair spread out on the ground next to her cold, still, mutilated body...

"She's not dead!" he snarled as they burst out of the woods and the pair staggered past the stone hut. The instant they passed the plane of the property line, the voices and the disturbing images cut off, and the air returned to its normal late-summer warmth.

Harry fell to his knees as Sirius collapsed, panting, onto the grass. Harry let go of the thick fur, patting the animal's shoulder as he whined softly. No sooner had Harry staggered to his feet than he felt eyes on his back, making him spin around.

Arrayed all along the border of the property, at least twenty Dementors hovered, seeming to stare hungrily into Harry's soul. Ever so slowly, the one immediately across from Harry raised a glistening, skeletal hand. He froze in horror as the creature calmly reached forward, pushing through the wards.

The fused stone blocks of the outbuilding began to glow slightly as an ominous hum made Harry's feet tingle inside his new boots. A lattice of multicoloured light appeared around the Dementor's outstretched hand, glowing brighter by the second. The hand jarred to a halt as the lattice turned red and abruptly began glowing brighter. A grating screech erupted from the creature and it abruptly pulled backward as the hand suddenly began to smoke.

"Oh no you don't," Harry spat, pulling out his wand. Whatever the wards were doing, this was the first time he'd ever heard a Dementor exhibit anything akin to pain. "*Accio Dementor!*" he growled, stabbing his wand at the thing.

The Dementor lurched forward, and the cries that erupted threatened to rupture Harry's eardrums as its whole body was outlined in an angry blaze of crimson light. The exposed flesh he could see was visibly withering away as the tattered black robes began to smoke. In seconds, all that was left was a foul-smelling pile of burning cloth.

Harry quickly glanced at the ward-anchor. The stones were only glowing a little brighter than before. None of the warning signs of an overload were present. Harry glared at the remaining Dementors, which had started to drift backwards, reluctant to give up their prey. He brought his wand around in a sweeping gesture.

"*Accio Dementors!*"

OoOoO

Remus John Lupin was never one to overstay his welcome. The fact that he was welcome within a wizarding home was miracle enough in itself, given the fact that they knew about his 'condition.'

He would have left by now, but he had wanted to say goodbye to Harry before he left. The boy's birthday had fallen on a Saturday, so he wouldn't see him again until the day after tomorrow. He'd have all day Sunday to prepare a 'special test' for their little defence seminar, but he wanted to get Harry's thoughts on how realistic to make it. On the other hand, he could understand why the boy might want to take a walk by himself on such a day. He was no doubt thinking about his parents. The Weasleys were very understanding as he lingered in their kitchen after helping with the washing up.

It was... odd, really... teaching James and Lily's son. The boy was surprisingly mature for his age, though the circumstances of his upbringing were far from ideal. While Remus had the utmost respect for Professor Dumbledore, Arthur had hinted at some things that were highly disturbing. If it were not for Harry's obvious enthusiasm at

having him for a teacher, he might have reconsidered his decision to apply at Hogwarts.

Not that he could really afford to, he mused wryly. His finances were far from stable, and he was ashamed to admit that the tutoring stipend he accepted in order to satisfy the Ministry was a windfall he'd sorely needed. It galled him to have to accept money from Harry for doing something he'd ordinarily do for free, but it might be no less mortifying than to show up at Hogwarts with little more than the robes on his back.

He looked up and smiled as Molly Weasley freshened his tea. He thanked her politely, and complimented her on one of the best meals he could remember ever eating. She blushed at the praise, but as far as he was concerned it was the unvarnished truth.

The Weasleys were quite probably one of the kindest families he'd ever met, and in the absence of James and Lily, he couldn't think of anyone he'd rather see taking care of Harry. All the same, he could tell they were a little... guarded... in their conversations. At first he thought their reticence might be related to his condition – many people were uncomfortable in his presence, but reluctant to say so directly. But over time he'd ruled that out. Today, with several people from Hogwarts around, they were similarly guarded. And the fact that their children were apparently in on it as well was equally surprising.

Harry himself had dropped a few hints that there were things afoot that he couldn't safely speak about. Lupin desperately hoped that he was correct in assuming they had to do with Sirius. He had a lot of things to say to his oldest surviving friend, starting with an abject apology.

His mind was jerked from its gloomy introspection when a shrill whistle erupted from a small brass fixture near the back door. No sooner did the noise begin than half the people in the room had their wands out.

"Something's trying to breach the wards," Arthur hurriedly explained as he followed his children toward the door. As fast as the adults had reacted, the youngsters he taught were even faster, and Molly called after her two youngest as they dashed out the back door.

Remus had no idea what could even consider an attempt on the wards as they had been described to him. On the other hand, it was easy to see where the breach had been attempted. A reddish glow lit up the treetops over the southern end of the property. A faint keening wail echoed through the evening air.

"Ron, Ginny, wait!" Molly shouted again from behind them.

"Harry's out there!" Ron puffed as he ran, but he did slow his pace slightly so the adults could catch up. The morning runs they'd described were definitely having a positive effect.

"We need to stay together," Arthur said, puffing a bit.

"Concentration of force," Remus added, which caused his students to slow even more. "We'll be more effective if we arrive together," he said quickly, which got a quick nod from Ron, who never ceased peering into the deepening gloom. The half-moon visible didn't shed enough light to see very well this late, not after being inside a well-lit house.

Not that he wanted it to be a full moon, of course.

The wailing and the hints of redness faded from the tree tops as they advanced, and the whistle from the open back door abruptly cut off. Remus hoped that was a good sign as they cut through the orchard.

"They must have held up," Arthur murmured next to him. "If they'd gone down, there'd be a lot more noise than that."

Remus nodded, grateful for the information, but they still pressed forward. There was light up ahead, flickering like a fire, as well as voices.

When they broke through one last thicket, Remus could see Harry standing next to the corner outbuilding, leaning with one hand resting gingerly on the stones as their glow slowly faded. He and another man, lying sprawled on the ground, were silhouetted against several piles of dark fabric burning fitfully in a line along the border.

Remus froze in shock as a very familiar voice came from the man laying with his back to them. “Do you think the Weasleys would take it amiss if I gave Bill a big sloppy kiss the next time I see him?”

“S-Sirius?” Remus gasped.

OoOoO

Harry bit back a curse as he stiffened at the sound of Remus’ voice. He really had only himself to blame though – he should have remembered that any significant load on the wards would signal an alarm inside the house. Of course that meant the Weasleys and any remaining guests would be there in seconds.

But there was something *extremely* satisfying about watching Dementors burning down to ashes. Rogue Dementors were almost unheard of in modern England, especially given the rather cushy deal the Ministry offered them at Azkaban. Nonetheless, Goldfarb hadn’t even reacted when Harry specifically requested that the wards be made capable of stopping the horrid creatures.

Of course, this went a good bit farther than ‘stopped’. On the other hand, given the number of warnings he’d received from various parties concerning the strength and dangerous nature of the new defences, he shouldn’t have been at all surprised. Seconds after incinerating a score of creatures that were immune to most magic, the ward anchor, drawing on the local geo-magical fields, was almost back to normal.

Sirius, who changed from a large dog back to his human form as he watched the show, seemed particularly gratified – not that Harry could blame him. And he agreed with his godfather regarding Bill. The oldest Weasley brother was getting a *very* sincere thank-you when he returned from China.

But that was in the future. For now, he had to deal with an extremely gobsmacked Remus Lupin. Sirius, for his part, was cringing like he’d been caught with his hands in the biscuit tin. Harry sighed. It was probably safe for Dumbledore to know that he’d had contact with Sirius. The Headmaster acknowledged his former student’s innocence and had received at least one report that the Ministry’s

intransigence on clearing his name had ulterior motives behind it. As long as he didn't discover from Remus the reason Sirius had been away from The Burrow...

"Padfoot, is that any way to greet an old friend?" Harry asked his godfather.

Sirius shook his head and stood up, leaving a large sack on the ground. He dusted the grass from his clothes before he turned around. "You're looking good, old man," he said with a smirk.

Lupin seemed to snap out of his trance at the words and bounded forward, seizing his friend in a rough embrace as he babbled apologies. Sirius' eyes widened for a moment as his normally reserved friend lifted him a few inches above the grass in his enthusiasm.

Harry couldn't resist laughing at the sight, but the chuckles died in his throat when he saw Ron and Ginny's faces. He sighed and rubbed wearily at his eyes. He was definitely in trouble again.

OoOoO

A few minutes later, they were all back in Molly's kitchen, drinking tea and munching on left-over birthday cake. Sirius, in particular, was famished, and had to dissuade Mrs. Weasley from getting out her frying pan. Harry held onto the sack Sirius had given him with a wink. It took no small amount of willpower to avoid opening the bag and checking out his 'Birthday Present' from Padfoot.

Of course, his other hand was not available at the moment. Ginny had it in a death-grip under the table as she sat next to him, on the opposite side from Sirius. Harry might have been a little awkward with this display normally, but he wasn't about to argue with her right now. Ron and Ginny had been clearly vexed with him as they walked back to the house, and he rather hurriedly explained why he hadn't had time to come back for help when he heard Padfoot's cries.

Eventually, Ron just let out a disgusted sigh and shook his head. "It's unreal, mate, the way things happen to you. This gets much worse, we're not letting you go to the loo by yourself. You know that, right?"

Harry snorted and looked over at Ginny, but she wasn't enjoying her brother's jibe. In fact, she looked rather miserable. She didn't say a single word on the way back to the house, so Harry didn't protest when, after they sat down at the scrubbed wood table, he felt her fingers wrap around his.

"I'm sorry we had to conceal things from you," Mr. Weasley apologized, "but it was necessary if you were going to be teaching at Hogwarts."

"How so?" Remus asked.

"Even if you wanted to keep it to yourself," Harry spoke up, "Professor Snape would have pulled that information right out of your head, using Legilimency."

Remus' eyes widened in alarm.

"Hermione figured out how he seemed to always know things he couldn't have. Legilimency lets him view your thoughts and memories," Harry explained. "Both he and Professor Dumbledore can do it. The Headmaster believes Sirius is innocent now, but Snape would love to put him back in Azkaban."

Sirius muttered something under his breath that earned him a sharp look from Mrs. Weasley.

"We've all learned Occlumency to block out Snape..." Harry said. "I can loan you a book if you are interested in the process."

Remus nodded gravely.

"Furthermore," Harry continued, "Professor Dumbledore knows that he needs me to deal with Riddle... so if he views this memory he'll hear me saying that if he tips off the Aurors, all agreements between us are null and void. I understand that Australia is rather nice this time of year." Harry scowled directly into Remus' eyes as he said this, hoping that if the Headmaster picked out this memory, he could tell Harry meant business.

Despite himself, Remus looked rather shocked.



"Looks just like James when he had that row with his father, doesn't he?" Sirius asked with a grin. "That first weekend you came to visit?"

Remus nodded slowly.

"I'd say he's well on the way to becoming the next Marauder," Sirius added with a smirk.

Harry tried not to cringe as Fred and George's heads snapped around with an audible crack. "Marauders?" they asked in unison.

Remus rolled his eyes as Sirius frowned. "Yeah," he drawled, "that's what they called us when we went to Hogwarts."

Fred dashed out of the room and pelted up the stairs with audible thumps. George just stared at the two men until his brother returned with a very familiar piece of folded parchment. Their parents looked back and forth between the twins and Sirius in obvious confusion.

"If you're who you say you are," Fred said quickly, "you'll know what to do with this."

Sirius plucked the parchment from Fred's trembling hand with a large toothy grin. "I thought this had been lost forever," he murmured as he pulled out his wand. "I solemnly swear I am up to no good," he said.

As the map activated, Fred and George got up from their chairs and dropped to their knees on the floor of the kitchen. "We're not worthy! We're not worthy!" they chanted as they kowtowed to Sirius and Remus. Harry wondered if this was something else they'd learned from Lee Jordan's cousin...

Remus at least had the grace to look embarrassed, while Sirius nearly fell out of his chair laughing at the twins. Remus shook his head and tapped the map, murmuring "Mischief managed."

"How did you get hold of this?" Sirius asked when Fred and George stood up again.

"We nicked it from Filch's office," Fred said with a grin. "Took us nearly a fortnight to figure out the command words."

Mrs. Weasley looked back and forth from her sons to her guests, her face slowly reddening. "Mischief managed?" she asked. "So it's you two I have to thank for all the trouble my sons get into?"

With his guardian radiating a palpable sense of malice, Harry quickly spoke up. "Er, look at it this way, Mrs., er, Molly," he said. "Look at Sirius." He paused. "I mean, look at how Remus turned out. Doesn't that mean there's still hope for Fred and George yet?" He ignored the betrayed look Sirius gave him.

Mrs. Weasley opened her mouth, and then paused, peering at the genteel tutor-and-soon-to-be-professor. Remus shifted uneasily under her gaze, and then attempted a faint smile.

"I suppose you are right, Harry," she said after a moment, visibly subsiding.

OoOoO

Remus didn't leave until nearly midnight, and only Molly's offer to let him sleep over made him realize how late it had become. With several apologies that were promptly waved off, he departed through the Floo.

Once the green flames died away, everyone turned toward Harry and Sirius expectantly. Harry hated leaving Remus out of the loop on things, but he couldn't risk Dumbledore knowing of the Horcrux hunt just yet. "Should I open my present now?" he asked Sirius.

Sirius glanced at the Weasleys.

"They know," Harry said quietly.

"Then feel free," Sirius said with a broad grin.

Harry gingerly poured out the sack's contents onto the table. Along with the ring and the locket was a small golden cup engraved with a badger. He looked up sharply at Sirius. "You nicked the cup as well?" Harry demanded. "We aren't ready for Voldemort to know we're on to him yet!"

“Relax, Harry,” Sirius said with a grin. “I thought I’d just pop by and have a look-see. With what you told me, it wasn’t hard to spot the alarms he’d placed on it. Dark Lord or not, he’s not skilled with some of the finer details. We had far more trouble getting itching powder into Flitwick’s wardrobe our fifth year.”

“See, Mum,” Fred quipped, “there is some practical use to what we do!”

A quick glare from Mrs. Weasley silenced her son.

“I also stopped by Little Hangleton,” Sirius added. “All of Tom Riddle Senior’s bones have been pulverized and banished to the four winds. I Transfigured some twigs and left them inside the grave though. If they don’t notice, they’ll be in for a nasty surprise if they try that ritual.”

Harry nodded slowly, trying to assimilate it all. With these out of the picture, that left only Nagini and the Sorting Hat. Voldemort’s familiar was eaten by Norbert in the original timeline, and its death proved to be sufficient to release the piece of Voldemort’s soul that it housed. And he knew where the Hat was.

“Good work,” Harry said. “But how did you acquire that entourage?” he asked.

Sirius made a face. “I’m not precisely sure. They were roaming around in a grove of trees near the river... about ten miles from here. I didn’t think Dementors would recognize me as a dog, but they immediately began chasing me. I wasn’t sure if the wards would stop them, but if they didn’t, I planned to drop the bag here and then lead them as far away as I could.” He shrugged uncomfortably under Harry’s glare.

“Now you know how it sounds,” Ginny murmured, bringing Harry up short.

“It’s been a long day,” Mr. Weasley interjected, “perhaps we should all get some sleep.”

Sirius was all for sleeping in the shed again, just in case someone came to call, but Mrs. Weasley wouldn't hear of it. The twins quickly volunteered to double up so Sirius could use their other bed. Harry smiled faintly as they dragged their idol up to their room. He walked up the stairs with Ginny, pausing at her landing.

"I'm sorry I worried you today," he said in a low voice as Ron passed them.

Ginny made a face and rubbed at her eyes. "I know you didn't do it on purpose," she said. "But that doesn't make it any easier."

Harry sighed. "How about I promise to be as careful as I can, and to get you and the others involved whenever possible?"

Ginny looked up at him suddenly. "You really mean that?" she asked.

Harry nodded. "If I had you and Ron with me, and all three of us were able to cast the Patronus charm, I think we could have driven them off. I'll admit I enjoyed seeing them burn on the wards, but it was a close thing getting back here."

"You really mean that?" Ginny asked. "No more of that 'keeping us safe' rubbish? And what is the Patronus charm?"

"It's one of the few spells an individual can do to hold off a Dementor," Harry answered. He took a deep breath. "And as for the rest... I can't promise I won't ever think that again, Ginny. I really don't want anyone else I care about getting hurt. But I'll try."

"I suppose that's all I can ask for," she said ruefully.

"It's not that I don't think you are capable," Harry reminded her, "it's the... other things. You know?" *Like seeing you dead again.*

"I know," she said, looking down. "Good night, Harry. Happy birthday."

"Good night, Ginny."

OoOoO

Harry did not sleep well that night. He dreamt of another time when Dementors had almost consumed the souls of himself and his godfather. When he awoke, he was still thinking about the foul creatures.

The fact that they immediately pursued Padfoot was quite... interesting. He mulled this over as he awoke and walked the bounds of the property in the early pre-dawn light. He carefully banished the charred remnants of their cloaks and removed any sign of their struggle against the wards.

A colony of rogue Dementors would have preyed on nearby humans, Muggle or wizard, until they were stopped. The fact that these had kept to themselves was highly suspicious.

Their pursuit of Sirius in his Animagus form was even worse. According to what he'd been told long ago, the emotions of animals didn't excite them very much. They had to know, in some way, that Padfoot was no ordinary animal.

And only Wormtail could have revealed that particular piece of information.

Since the traitor had been given over to the Ministry, it seemed likely that the Dementors that attacked yesterday had been sent, more than likely on the orders of whoever now controlled the island prison.

This did not bode well. For any of them.

As Harry walked back to the house, he pondered his options. Whoever had sent the Dementors wasn't likely to publicly admit it – most wizards and witches hated the damned things. The implication that the Ministry was severely compromised at high levels was troubling though.

He sighed as he wandered into the kitchen and fired up the stove. Perhaps if the Dementors just disappeared, whoever sent them might wonder if they'd gone rogue. Best if no one at The Burrow ever mentioned seeing them, at least for now. He let his hands begin the preparations for a large breakfast as he wondered what they should do next. Perhaps Remus should jump ahead a bit in his syllabus.

As appetizing smells began to fill the kitchen, Harry sighed. This was a lot easier when he knew what was going on, and what would happen next. He'd truly taken the bull by the horns altering the timeline, and now he was stuck with everyone else, wondering what the hell was going on.

OoOoO

The following Monday, Remus had a surprise for them. He arrived at The Burrow with a large trunk in tow. Once they were assembled for class, he popped open the catches on the trunk and opened it to reveal a large number of Quaffle-sized spheres.

Clearly enjoying the curious stares from his audience, the wizard lifted one out of the trunk, revealing it to be fairly light. He tapped it once with his wand, whispering something under his breath, and the ball abruptly lifted into the air. It floated about ten feet in front of them and began to shimmer. Suddenly, it seemed to expand as if black fabric was sprouting from its surface. In seconds the sphere was replaced with the form of a wizard in black robes with a featureless blank white face.

It wasn't a Death Eater mask, but it was close enough for Harry to feel his insides freeze up. He didn't even recall drawing his wand, but it was nonetheless pointing squarely at the target. "What are you playing at?" he snapped.

Remus raised his eyebrow at Harry's vehemence. "I've prepared some targets for you to practice on. I thought you might prefer something with a bit of realism, but faces are devilishly hard to get right."

Hermione gave Harry a careful sideways glance before clearing her throat. "Er, it does look a bit like a Death Eater, doesn't it, sir?"

Remus frowned. "A bit, I suppose, but how did you...? Never mind." He raised his wand and, with a flick, changed the robes to a dull brown. "Is that better?"

Harry nodded, trying to get his heart to slow back down. He *knew* he was over-reacting, but he just couldn't seem to help it. For an instant

when he first saw it, the smooth white face was replaced with the hated mask of one of Voldemort's murderous sycophants. The rage engendered by that visage was very familiar to Harry's older self, but it was nonetheless a nasty surprise to him now.

It took several moments, while Remus set up the other targets, before Harry could get himself completely under control again. He didn't even want to imagine what Remus thought of that display. Or what Dumbledore might make of it if he viewed the memory.

Ginny gave him a careful nudge as Remus finished. He had them line up so there was a figure opposite of each of them, and on his command they started to duck and dodge like a real opponent. Objectively, Harry had to admire the thought and workmanship his teacher had put into them.

Subjectively, his face was still burning from his earlier display.

When Remus signalled for them to start, Harry's wand was a blur of motion. They were instructed to just use Stinging Hexes – the magical field surrounding the orbs would register each hit and signal when twenty had been made. While Harry was using the suggested spell, he had no doubt that he was letting a bit more power flow into them than was strictly required. His brown-robed opponent tried to twist and turn to avoid his hexes, but each one struck, jarring it backwards a little each time. It seemed that he'd hardly started before the ball let out a loud ding. The simulacrum surrounding it faded away.

Harry took a deep breath and blew it out, ignoring the tiny wisp of smoke curling from the end of his wand. From the sound of things, his friends were all still firing. From the sound of Ron's muttered swearing, they probably would be for a while. Harry bowed to the inevitable and turned toward Remus.

The man was staring at him with unabashed concern etched on his features. Harry shrugged helplessly.

Ginny finished next, then Ron, Hermione, and Luna all completed the exercise at roughly the same time. Percy, Fred, and George were the last to finish.

Remus nodded. "Very good. Ron, you kept up an impressive rate of fire, but your accuracy suffered. Hermione fired less than half as many hexes, but completed in roughly the same time. That said, Hermione, you would do well to loosen up a bit and try to go a bit faster. Percy, that goes doubly so for you. While a direct hit is preferable, it's not necessary for most curses that they strike the exact centre of the target. Fred, George, both of you would do well to work on smoothing out your wand motions – less jerking back and more follow-through." He continued, critiquing each of them, but not mentioning Harry's performance at all.

Harry couldn't help but notice that the twins were even more attentive than usual.

The rest of the session continued as normal, but when he was preparing to leave, Remus asked Harry to help him with his trunk. As they made their way toward the Floo, the older man spoke in a low voice. "I'd like to apologize, Harry. The resemblance hadn't even occurred to me as I was finishing the orbs. Of course, if I was in your position, I would have read up on everything I could find concerning the war. That was frightfully insensitive of me, and I must apologize."

Harry shook his head. "It wasn't your fault," he insisted, "I was just overreacting. I do that, a bit."

"Like when you sent the Slytherin Quidditch squad to the hospital wing for a fortnight?" Sirius asked as they entered the kitchen.

Harry scowled at the shocked look on Remus' face, and the wide grin on Sirius'. "I see the twins have been carrying tales again," he observed sourly.

"Well, I did ask how the Quidditch season went," Sirius said innocently, "but it seemed that more action happened off the field last season."

Remus, of course, was not about to leave until he'd had the whole story out of Harry. He supposed the man worried he'd be partially to blame if Harry misused something he'd taught, but he really wasn't in the mood for any second-guessing.



Fortunately, the man's reaction was a pleasant surprise. "That's quite an interesting use for a Noise-Making Charm," Remus murmured thoughtfully when Harry was done. "And an ingenious way of ending a fight without inflicting permanent harm. Top marks, Harry!"

"I just wish Dumbledore agreed," Harry snorted.

"I heard about that as well," Sirius commiserated. "But he did come around in the end, right?"

Harry nodded. "I suppose he had no choice once he knew they were lying. I practically dared him to view their memories of the ambush."

"This Legilimency business seems very questionable to me," Remus said. "But it appears I have little choice but to learn Occlumency if I wish to teach at Hogwarts *and* keep my thoughts to myself."

"At least now you know why it was so hard to get anything past Dumbledore," Sirius said with a grin.

"Quite," Remus replied, deadpan. Then he grinned at his childhood friend in a way that seemed to melt years off his face.

OoOoO

Harry was mostly calmed down by the time they arrived at the Grangers' house. He was also sufficiently aware to notice the concerned looks Ginny was giving Luna. The blond girl had grown increasingly quiet and withdrawn over the summer, despite their best efforts – including letters relayed from Neville.

After Ginny's last attempt to draw the girl out as they marched out into the Grangers' back garden, the redhead gave Harry a very direct look. Harry nodded back, earning a quick smile as they paired off for some warm-up exercises.

Paul Ishimura couldn't make it today, so Harry was leading the group. While Harry ordinarily liked working with Hermione's godfather, today he was glad because it gave him a chance to talk to Luna.

When he paired everyone off to spar, he held Luna back and suggested she do some extra stretches with him. The 'Drunken Boxing' style she'd adopted often sorely pushed the limits of her flexibility. It also gave him a pretext to talk to her as they moved off a ways from the others and dropped onto the soft grass to do some hamstring stretches.

Trying to mince words with Luna Lovegood was futile at best, so Harry decided to borrow a page from her grimoire and go for the incredibly blunt approach. "You seem very sad today. Ginny and the others are worried about you."

Luna's expression didn't change, but she did pause as she leaned her torso forward until it almost touched one thigh. "I miss Neville," she said.

"We miss him too," Harry agreed. "But you two do at least get to write each other." Hedwig was visiting the Longbottom house at least as often as she'd visited The Burrow his first year.

"That's part of the problem," she said quietly. "Even though he doesn't come right out and say it, he's been dreadfully unhappy this summer. He misses his friends, and he's worried about getting behind in the training and becoming a liability." She sniffed. "And most of the reasons for why he is unhappy have to do with me. I really don't care for that feeling."

Harry scowled. "I think it's a load of rubbish if you are blaming yourself, Luna. I think his grandmother is the only one responsible for this mess."

"She wouldn't have confined him to their house if it wasn't for me," she said. "I think I went a bit too far, too soon. I wanted him to like me, but now he's probably wishing he'd never met me."

Harry grew rather alarmed at the tone of his friend's voice. He'd never really seen Luna so focused like this before. For once, that faraway, dreamy look of hers was completely absent. But in its place was a visage of pure misery and guilt. Harry didn't have to think twice about which one he preferred.

“Luna,” he said firmly, “I think he does like you. And he’s not stupid enough to blame you for his gran’s actions. In fact, I bet he even misses the gentle teasing you put him through.”

“You do?” she asked suddenly, looking up. “You know, don’t you?” She peered at him rather intently, the wire-frame glasses making her gaze seem even more intense. “Were we... together? In the future, that is?”

Harry looked down and swallowed. “I don’t know, really. You didn’t date when I was at Hogwarts,” he said, looking up. Luna’s frown made him quickly qualify that statement. “But then again, you were in Ravenclaw, and we’d never got to know you until fifth year. And I was gone for Neville’s seventh year, so I really don’t know.” He paused, swallowing. “But I do know that you two were friends. And after Hogwarts fell, we found the two of you lying next to each other where the students made their stand.”

Luna’s eyes were shining, but she didn’t seem quite so sad, so Harry pressed on. “And remember, the Neville I knew then was a lot different than the one I know now. He hadn’t really come into his own until later. That Neville had very little confidence for most of the time I knew him. He was afraid of Snape, afraid of getting hurt, afraid of failing.”

“My Neville isn’t afraid of anything, is he?” Luna asked softly.

Harry stifled a grin at the possessive pronoun. “No, he isn’t,” he agreed. “And I don’t think he’s afraid of his grandmother anymore, either.”

“No... no, he’s not, is he?” Luna said slowly. After a moment she finished the stretches and they both stood up and got into ready stances.

As Harry led them through a three-step blocking drill with a palpable sense of relief, he wondered what they could possibly do about Neville’s situation. He had a feeling things might get worse before they got better.

OoOoO

The last month of the holidays passed with much less drama than it started. At Harry's request, Remus had taught them the basics of the Patronus Charm. While Harry allowed no more than a thin silvery vapour to escape his wand, none of his friends could even get that far. Remus consoled them that the spell was *highly* advanced magic, and not something children of their ages could be expected to know, let alone master.

All the same, Harry couldn't come up with an innocent explanation for the presence of the Dementors that ambushed Sirius. None of his friends could either. So they all practiced the charm on a daily basis.

Finally, the end of August arrived, and with it the annual trek to Diagon Alley. This year the plan was a little different than normal, for more than the usual reasons.

Harry awoke early on a slightly overcast Tuesday, taking care not to wake Ron or anyone else as he took a shower and did his normal daily grooming with somewhat greater than usual care, and finished by donning the plain black robe he'd worn to the custody hearing. When he softly crept down the stairs, Mr. Weasley was waiting for him in the kitchen, reading the *Daily Prophet* and frowning.

"You know, you don't have to take off from work for this," Harry said quietly as he poured some tea.

"It's not a bother," his guardian said. "And it's important that Molly or I be present when this interview takes place."

Harry shrugged uncomfortably. "I know you don't approve of this."

Arthur made a dismissive gesture. "At the time, your agreement made sense. We had no idea where... your godfather was, or what condition he was in. Using her to put pressure on the Ministry was rather resourceful. I just hope you don't have cause to regret this all later."

Harry nodded. "I think I've demonstrated to her satisfaction that she has a lot more to gain by being civil with us. Exclusive interviews with The Boy Who Lived let her name her price with most editors." Harry

grinned ruefully. "She was a holy terror, er, *before*, and I'd much rather have her on our side than our enemies'."

"I suppose you would know," Arthur agreed thoughtfully as he put the paper down. "Have a bit of toast and we'll be off. Molly would flay me, but I'd rather not keep this woman waiting. We can always get something to eat afterwards."

Harry nodded and ate quickly.

He was slowly getting better at Floo travel... the emphasis on slowly. This time he managed to only fall to one knee when he arrived at the Leaky Cauldron. Arthur gave him a hand up and they made their way to the bar.

Old Tom brought them up to a private room reserved for this meeting and bid them a good day. Harry was sort of relieved that the man didn't make a huge fuss over him, or even stare too long.

Harry took a deep breath before opening the door. A tall woman in a venomous-looking green robe was sitting in a chair pulled up to the table. Her stiffly-curled hair didn't sway in the slightest as she turned toward him and smiled, rising to her feet. "Mr. Potter!" she said in a falsely cheery voice. "It's so good to finally meet you in person!"

Harry nodded and shook the hand she extended toward him, careful not to jab himself on her long red fingernails.

"And this must be Arthur Weasley, your guardian?" she asked. "I understood this was to be a one-on-one interview," she observed, though her smile didn't waver at all.

"I'm afraid I did insist that one of us be present for this interview," Mr. Weasley explained in a friendly, but firm, voice.

Harry shrugged. "He's completely within his rights to do so. If you prefer, Ms. Skeeter, we could conduct this by owl post," he offered.

"Oh no," Rita said, waving one of her manicured hands. "That won't be necessary. I'd have prepared some questions for him as well, if I'd known he was coming."

Arthur looked somewhat startled by this admission, but quickly busied himself moving an extra chair up to the table.

Harry moved the unoccupied chair to one side so that he and Arthur both sat facing the reporter. "I don't think Mr. Weasley is ready to be the subject of an interview," Harry said carefully. "And I don't have the right to promise anything on his behalf. I'd prefer it if his name was left out this, for now."

Rita seemed to think it over for a moment before nodding her agreement. "First of all, I would like to thank you for consenting to this interview," she said in a somewhat ironic tone as her words were taken down by a floating quill. When it was done, she tapped it with her wand and wordlessly handed the parchment to Harry. "As you can see," she continued, "this is a standard dictation quill – and not a Quick-Quotes Quill."

Harry nodded. "I appreciate that, Ms. Skeeter. If all goes well, we may be able to do this again in future."

Rita's pencilled eyebrow lifted as she absorbed Harry's implied offer. "I think... we can be helpful to each other in future, Mr. Potter. I have no interest in roasting the goose that lays such golden eggs."

Harry carefully ignored the tightening muscles along Arthur's jaw. "That would be nice," he agreed. "And if you ever have... difficulty... in persuading your editor to run a story as it is written, I have a friend who may be able to help."

"The Lovegood girl?" Rita asked.

Harry raised an eyebrow.

"Anyone with time and resources could find out quite a bit about you and your friends at Hogwarts," she explained. "I've had both as I prepared for our little talk. All the same, I've never really been interested in writing for *The Quibbler*."

Harry shrugged. "Once the story is out, if it's good enough, it will spread on its own. That alone will put pressure on your editor."

Rita nodded. "But do you really anticipate anything of that... nature?"

Harry smiled. "Anything's possible. I think you may find that *The Quibbler* is a bit less subject to... outside influences... than other publications."

Rita's eyes narrowed and her nails tapped a staccato on the worn varnish of the table. "The Ministry?" she asked quietly, darting her eyes toward Arthur.

"Anything is possible," Harry said blandly. "I appear to have attracted the attentions of a wide variety of people."

"That's one way of putting it," Rita said as she reactivated her quill. "Let's start at the beginning. I understand you were raised by your aunt and her family?"

Harry felt a muscle in his cheek twitch at the mention of the Dursleys. "Yes," was all he said.

"Why did you leave?" Rita asked, her features taking on a slightly predatory cast.

Harry had no doubt she knew exactly why he'd left Privet Drive, but this wasn't something he wanted discussed in the press. "It didn't work out," he said shortly. He took a breath. "They were terrified at the idea of magic, and it was unacceptable to them that I continue living under their roof. After my first year at Hogwarts, it was necessary for me to find somewhere else to live. Fortunately, my friend's parents agreed to take me in."

"Do you agree with the members of the Wizengamot who maintain that Muggle-born witches and wizards should be removed from Muggle households as soon as they are discovered – both for their own protection and to maintain the Statute of Secrecy?"

Harry raised an eyebrow at that while Arthur's face slowly reddened. "No, I do not," he said firmly. "I think that would be a complete overreaction. Not all Muggles hate magic – they vary as much as wizards and witches do. One of my close friends is Muggle-born and her parents are not only supportive, they are completely fascinated by

what they've learned of magic. They even host our study group in the afternoon."

"Ah yes, your study group," Rita said. "Quite a bit of luck, having a Hogwarts professor teach you over the summer, isn't it?"

Harry shrugged. The Ministry records were, of course, open to the public, and Rita was displaying an unnerving tendency for having done her homework on him this time around. "He was a good friend to my parents, so I suppose I had an in there. Of course, the underage magic laws not really fair to the Muggle-born students, since they don't really have access to tutors who can train them over the summer."

"Perhaps," Rita agreed, "but it is the law. On the other hand, do you think it will be hard for him to mark you fairly during the coming term?"

Harry sighed. "Remus Lupin is what I would call a 'tough but fair' teacher. If anything, I'm afraid he's going to expect more from us than he will from the other students. In the end though, what will really matter is what I get on my Defence OWL and NEWT."

"You're already worrying about those?" Rita asked. "Your OWL exams are not for almost three years, correct?"

Harry nodded. "Perhaps, but I'm always looking forward."

"Is that why you started a... Duelling Association, I think it was, at Hogwarts?"

"I didn't really create it," Harry said diffidently. "Professor McGonagall is the faculty sponsor, and she established most of the curriculum."

"You are far too modest, Harry!" Rita said with a somewhat predatory smile. "I understand that you teach most of the sessions, and that you've become quite an accomplished duellist yourself!"

Harry felt his stomach roll over. *Who the hell had she been talking to?* "Well, I only came in second in the tournament at the end of the year," he temporized. "I suppose I was inspired by Gilderoy Lockhart," he said.



Rita's eyebrows rose at this. "How so?" she asked.

Harry didn't know what kind of favours or currency Lockhart's publicist had used to keep Rita from pressing charges against his comatose client, but Harry doubted anything he said would be included. "Well, he tried to organize a duelling club right before winter holiday, but it was a complete shambles. The man didn't know the first thing about it and Professor Snape trounced him without even trying. That, among other things, clued me in that whatever he might be teaching us in his classes was *extremely* suspect."

"So you are pleased the he is to be replaced this year with Professor Lupin?" Rita asked archly.

"Words cannot convey the depth of my gratitude that I will not have to sit another class with that utter fraud," Harry said firmly.

That earned him a smile. "You said earlier that you came in second in a duelling tournament... who won?" Rita asked.

"That would be Ginny Weasley," Harry said as Arthur let out a sigh.

Rita looked faintly surprised. Harry mused that she apparently hadn't consulted her source since the end of term. "How did you feel about being defeated by a witch who is, I believe, a year younger than you?"

Harry shrugged. "She's a founding member of the Duelling Association and she's dead quick with her wand. I tried to snag her legs, but she leapt over the spell and Stunned me senseless while she was in midair. It was a beautiful move."

"She also lives at The Burrow, doesn't she?" Rita asked. "Is there a bit of romance brewing for you, Harry?"

Harry tried not to let any tension show as he sensed Rita falling into habits he knew all too well. He very carefully avoided looking over at Arthur. "Er, we often get stuck together on kitchen duty. But she's not the only witch to join the Duelling Association. Hermione Granger and Luna Lovegood also helped found it, and we have students from all houses and years now. And I'm a little young to have a girlfriend yet."

“Why all the sudden interest in duelling by Hogwarts students?” Rita asked, smoothly ignoring his glare. “It’s been outlawed by the Ministry as a way of settling disputes for many years now.”

Harry took a deep breath as he formulated his answer. “Well, Rita, an accomplished duellist is far more capable of defending themselves from attack than an untrained witch or wizard. If anything, the last war should have taught us that it doesn’t hurt to be too careful.”

“I see,” Rita said, watching the quill move. “How are you adjusting to your new home?”

Harry smiled. “I feel very fortunate that the Weasleys took me in. They are a great family and they’ve gone out of their way to make me feel at home. I’ll be a lifetime paying back what I owe them.”

Arthur’s face turned very red at this and he opened his mouth to protest, but glanced at the quill and shut it quickly. Harry smiled at him fondly.

“I understand that the decision regarding where you would live was rather hotly contested at the Ministry,” Rita said, her eyes glittering behind her bejewelled spectacles.

It occurred to Harry that this was probably why she got into journalism in the first place. She genuinely enjoyed the thrill of the hunt as she put people on the spot and winnowed out all their secrets. Even in this setting, with all she had to lose by antagonizing her interview subject, she couldn’t completely suppress that side of her nature. Instead of opposing it, it occurred to him that it might be better to point her at more deserving targets and then get the hell out of the way. “Yes, it was,” he replied. “Lucius Malfoy tried to have me delivered to his mansion so I could be brought up to hate Muggles and non-pure-bloods like that murderous thief he calls a son. Fortunately, Madam Bones saw through his design and assigned me to more suitable guardians.”

Rita blinked and her mouth dropped open slightly. “That’s quite an accusation,” she said carefully. Arthur just stared at him.

Harry nodded. "The incident that precipitated my removal from the Dursleys occurred when someone sent me a box full of angry Doxys on my birthday. I was bitten and poisoned, and my familiar nearly blinded. As you can imagine, for a family that disliked and feared magic, this was the last straw. As the sole wizard in a Muggle house, I was, of course, monitored for magic use. Defending myself, I risked expulsion from Hogwarts and the destruction of my wand."

Rita's face was rapt as her quill moved over the parchment, so Harry doubted she'd learned all these details.

"When I mentioned this incident at the Ministry hearing, and how I'd been rescued by the Weasleys, Mr. Malfoy's fury was clearly visible. As a member of the Hogwarts Board of Governors, he was no doubt ready to have me expelled at the first hint of trouble. Fortunately, the investigating Auror had the charges dismissed under the self-defence clause." Harry took a deep breath to collect himself. "His son, Draco, was also involved in my injuries this past term. I was hit in the back with a Stunning Spell while climbing a flight of stairs. I didn't see my attacker, but I did hear him and Draco's nasal twang is very distinctive."

"Why would he do something like that?" Rita asked as she placed a fresh sheet of parchment under the quill.

"He needed me out of the way so he could use a Polyjuice Potion to impersonate me and burgle my dormitory. He stole a family heirloom and some other items that were used in an attempt to murder another student the day you arrived at Hogwarts."

Rita just stared at him for a moment. "Can you prove any of this?" she asked.

"Only indirectly," Harry admitted. "Draco was caught red-handed with the item that was stolen from my trunk and was expelled for it. As for the rest of it, the timing of certain events doesn't allow for any other interpretations."

"If you are so certain, why wasn't this brought to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement?" Rita asked.

“Well,” Harry explained, “I knew that without overwhelming evidence, it would be useless.”

Rita paused, frowning. “Would you care to explain why, Mr. Potter?”

“Certainly,” Harry said. “As you can imagine, when I became aware of the Magical World and my place within it, I read every book I could find on recent history, especially with regards to the war. The more I read, the more I came to one inescapable conclusion.” He knew he was being a trifle theatrical, but his audience seemed to appreciate a little showmanship.

“And what conclusion was that?” Rita asked, her eyes glittering.

“As a whole, the Wizarding World is almost irretrievably corrupt,” Harry declared. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Arthur turn to stare at him again.

“Can you elaborate, Harry?” Rita asked.

Harry shrugged. “One of the first things I looked up was what happened to Voldemort’s followers. Naturally, I was wondering who I needed to keep an eye out for. I noticed something rather odd... All of Voldemort’s followers who were captured before he disappeared went to Azkaban and, with very few exceptions, never repudiated him. But after his disappearance, practically every captured Death Eater claimed to have been placed under the Imperius Curse, and most were released by the Ministry. That’s quite a statistical anomaly, isn’t it?” He pretended to ignore the start Rita gave when he used the Dark Lord’s name.

“So you maintain that those claims were false? And that they were willing followers of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named?” Rita asked.

“It’s awfully fishy, isn’t it?” Harry observed. “Besides that, I looked up some old articles in *Forensic Thaumaturgy* regarding the Dark Mark. The terminology is pretty dense, but it implies that it’s a modified version of the Protean Charm, and according to my NEWT study guide, the Protean Charm is awfully fussy. Casting it on an unwilling magical subject or one already subjected to powerful magic like an Unforgivable Curse would be nearly impossible.”

Rita's eyes were wide as the quill continued taking down Harry's words. "And so with respect to the Ministry...?"

"Well, it's obvious, isn't it?" Harry said. "Those forgiven Death Eaters were all from wealthy and influential families, or were closely allied with them. Money and/or favours had to change hands for that many people to drop the ball and let them go free. But that's just the tip of the iceberg. Look at my godfather, and the Ministry's complete failure to give him a trial while he rotted in Azkaban – for a crime he never committed. Look at the goblins, treated as second-class citizens, despite the vital role they play in the Wizarding economy. Look at house-elves, who are treated even worse. Sometimes I wonder if the Statute of Secrecy isn't maintained more to prevent the Ministry from being scrutinized too closely by the Muggle governments. By Muggle standards, I'm afraid the Wizarding world would be considered hopelessly backward and barbaric."

Rita's eyes were bulging now, though Harry couldn't blame her. She'd just watched the Boy Who Lived declare war on half of the Wizarding world.

OoOoO

Harry was very stiff and absolutely famished by the time they were done. They left Rita with a fat stack of parchment. Her photographer arrived near the end of the interview and Harry reluctantly allowed them to take a picture of him sitting with Rita. He tried to look as calm as he wasn't.

Afterwards, they took the stairs back down to the tap room. Arthur led him to the back wall, where he quickly tapped the bricks and opened the passage into Diagon Alley.

The Alley was already full of families purchasing school supplies and various sundries. To Harry's surprise, Arthur led him to Florean Fortescue's ice cream parlour, where he purchased both of them an ice cream sundae.

"Ordinarily, this isn't my idea of a proper luncheon," Arthur said quietly as they sat down at a table in the back, "but you look rather worn out. Just don't say anything to Molly, all right?" He looked left

and right. "I sometimes duck in here when work has been particularly vexing."

Harry nodded wearily and smiled. "Your secret is safe with me," he said.

"I just hope you don't have to do that again any time soon," Arthur said, frowning. "That woman was absolutely insatiable with all her questions. I mean, why should she even care if you wear boxers or briefs? You're thirteen years old!"

Harry shrugged; glad he hadn't brought up other issues. "I think she may be planning to sell a story to *Witch Weekly* as well; that question sounds right up their alley. I suppose I can't blame her for trying to get as much mileage out of this as possible."

"Perhaps," Arthur said dubiously. "Harry, I do hope you know what you are doing. When that interview is published, you're going to make a lot of very powerful enemies."

Harry nodded, and then leaned forward, lowering his voice to little more than a whisper. "I know. But the way I see it, it's inevitable. Do you know what the Ministry did the first year after Voldemort returned?"

Arthur shook his head.

"They attacked me and Dumbledore for making up stories. Dumbledore was removed from most of the offices he held, and the *Daily Prophet* published story after story about how I was a mentally unstable, attention-seeking liar," Harry said, his eyes hardening. "It was a nasty surprise when Fudge turned on Dumbledore, and the free year Riddle was given to build up his forces cost us dearly. The Ministry didn't even fight until Dumbledore and Voldemort duelled in the Atrium practically in front of Fudge. By then, Tom was nearly ready anyway, and his second reign of terror started where the first one left off."

Arthur looked sick.

"I'm just striking first this time. Right now, Fudge barely goes to the bathroom without Lucius Malfoy's permission. Both of them have got to go. And if they start their smear campaign second... well, then it just looks like payback – and people might not take everything they claim about me as the gospel truth." Harry looked down at his melting ice cream. "I don't see a better way to stop them than taking the offensive."

"I understand, Harry," Arthur said. "But I hope you are ready for the repercussions from this."

"I've been publicly vilified before," he replied, "I'm sort of used to it by now. And Rita knows that if she wants any more from me, she'll keep your name out of this. If anyone approaches you at work, you're not sure, but you think we made contact through owl post, and you don't want it to get back to her that you've forbidden us to communicate. You can also imply that Dumbledore is involved."

Arthur raised an eyebrow at him. "That's hardly honest," he said.

"No, it isn't," Harry agreed. "But anyone asking you to silence me is at least probably an enemy. You planted disinformation during the first war when you were part of the Order, didn't you?"

Arthur's eyes bulged in their sockets for a moment. "How did you-? No, never mind. You're right, though, I suppose this really is a wartime situation." He sighed. "I'd hoped my children would never see it in their lifetimes."

Harry nodded. "The Horcrux situation made it likely we would, and the Ministry guaranteed it. But maybe, if we do it right, your grandchildren won't."

A/N:

Welcome to Year 3: The Dementors of Azkaban.

Many thanks to my Betas: the comely Runsamok, the brilliant, but twisted Kokopelli, and the ultimate Beta: Sherylyn! (*Note to self: Stop letting Kokopelli edit the Author's Notes.*)

If you have any questions about this, or any of my other stories, you can check out my yahoo group, Viridian Dreams. (The link is in my profile.)

I've also started a blog to show progress on the current chapters. The link for that is available in the Yahoo group or my profile.

A personal note to a thankfully small portion of my readers:

Positive, thoughtful reviews encourage me to continue the story and work on the next update. Obscene, threatening, and insulting messages, emails and reviews from readers angry at me because I don't update faster have the opposite effect.

When you are paying my salary, you will have the right to impose deadlines... and not until then.

-Matthew



## Chapter 32

Fortunately, the remainder of their day at Diagon Alley passed with a bit less drama. Mrs. Weasley and Mrs. Granger arrived with Hermione and the Weasley children just after noon, and Harry and Arthur met them in front of Gringotts as planned.

Books and supplies were purchased as they fought through the crowds of school children and their parents. While Harry recognized many of the younger faces, he was pleasantly surprised by the occasional smile or greeting from fellow Hogwarts students. He didn't remember being that popular before, which made it rather odd. Was it the Quidditch victories, or had some hint of the events surrounding Draco's expulsion made it onto the grapevine?

At least no one here seemed to be bent on avenging that loss. While he saw several Slytherin students, most of them maintained carefully neutral expressions. No one from the Quidditch team or Draco's inner circle made an appearance, for which he was glad.

Another deviation for this trip was a quick errand Harry and Arthur ran to Chisam's Captivating Cases to look at some magical luggage. He definitely didn't want a repeat of last term's burglary – he was just lucky Draco hadn't found the Glock, or, if he had, didn't know what it was.

Just thinking about that made him shudder.

Knowing that this was one area in which he mustn't cut any corners, Harry made sure to withdraw a goodly sum from his vault after the interview. Arthur Weasley eyed the bulging sack of Galleons curiously, but didn't say anything as they left the lobby of Gringotts.

Chisam's shopfront looked a bit dusty and out of date, but it was the only one on the Alley that specialized in magical luggage. There were some businesses on the continent that did custom orders by Owl Post, but Harry didn't really want to return to Hogwarts without secure storage for his belongings. He kicked himself for not thinking about this sooner, but they'd been so busy while on holiday this year...

He shook his head to clear it of regrets, lips twisting at the irony of such a sentiment, and pushed open the door.

The shop was dimly lit, the walls lined with shelves holding trunks, cases, and valises of all shapes and sizes. A bell attached to the door rang softly as they entered, and a dark-haired young wizard in his twenties stepped out of the back room. "Can I help you?" he asked in a pleasant voice.

"Mr. Chisam?" Arthur asked curiously.

"My father," the younger man explained. "I'm standing in for him while he and Mum are on holiday. Can I help you with something?"

"Er, yes," Mr. Weasley answered. "My ward here had his trunk broken into last term, and we're looking for something a bit more secure."

Harry barely followed the conversation, as his eyes drifted toward a dusty black trunk that had four identical combination latches holding the lid shut. A vague memory stirred at the back of his mind. "What kind of trunk is that?" he asked, pointing toward the one that had seized his interest.

"Ah," Chisam the younger exclaimed, "I'm afraid that may be a bit out of your budget. That's one of the smaller Auror models. Extremely secure, but a bit pricey you know. We have..."

"Why does it have four locks?" Harry asked suddenly, as he remembered a larger version that had belonged to a certain retired Auror.

The clerk seemed a bit taken aback by the question. "Well, it's considerably larger on the inside than the outside, and depending on which lock is opened first, you can access four different coexisting storage spaces."

Harry, his suspicions confirmed, nodded happily. "How much?" he asked.

Mr. Chisam sighed and quoted a figure. "As you can see," he added reluctantly, "it's not really priced for the student market."

“If you can add a charm that will let me tell when someone’s been tampering with it, you have a deal.”

Arthur didn’t say or ask anything, other than looking vaguely amused, as Harry and Mr. Chisam haggled over the minor details. But as they left the shop, he asked in a low voice, “I assume there’s a purpose behind this?”

Harry nodded. “I still have a few things I need to keep secure,” he answered cryptically. “And with the extra spaces... well, I’m sure it will come in handy. We can move things forward a bit without revealing too much to our room-mates.”

Arthur nodded slowly, digesting this. “Well, I suppose this would be a good investment for the future, if you plan to travel when this is all over.”

Harry shrugged. “I’m not really thinking that far ahead, but you are right.”

Arthur frowned, but didn’t say anything.

In fact, they were both quiet until they rejoined the group led by Molly and the Grangers. The rest of their expedition passed as usual, though Harry did spend most of the remaining galleons at Flourish & Blotts. The manager also gave him a hefty discount after Harry showed him how to calm down the animated copies of the *Monster Book of Monsters*. Harry couldn’t help but smile as he stroked the spine of the copy a scared-looking Hufflepuff purchased, lulling it into somnolence. Hagrid had assigned this book, so it looked like their revelation of the *true* monster from the Chamber had cleared his name in this timeline as well.

At one point, Harry thought he saw Augusta Longbottom’s vulture hat sticking up from the press of people near Gringotts, but he didn’t say anything. Luna was with them, and seemed to be a bit cheerier than before, but the letters she exchanged with Neville had come less frequently as his grandmother seemed to monopolize more and more of his time. At least that’s what Neville implied in his last letter. In any case, Harry didn’t want another public confrontation with Neville’s

gran until he had a better handle on things. They'd see their friend soon enough on the Express.

Of course, as soon as she got him semi-alone, Molly asked him how things had gone with Rita Skeeter. Unfortunately, Harry's reply of "about how I expected," wasn't as reassuring a response as she seemed to be hoping for. Harry also noticed the concerned glance she shot at Arthur. He wasn't that good at reading this byplay, but he got the impression she was now just as disturbed as her husband. He wondered if there would be another long conversation after dinner that evening.

OoOoO

Albus Dumbledore slowly put down his copy of the special edition of the *Daily Prophet*. His eyes stared off into space as he frowned and he opened his desk drawer and retrieved a light blue potion. Madam Pomfrey had presented him with a set of mild pain-relieving potions after Minerva had seen him rub at his temples one time too many during a staff meeting. Even with his glasses, he was occasionally subject to a touch of eyestrain, and reviewing the joint budget allocations seemed to be quite sufficient to present him with a pounding headache.

But his current migraine had nothing to do with finances.

He barely registered the taste as he drank the potion, his mind still trying to make sense of everything he'd just read. The boy's statements were true, perhaps too much so. His bluntness, recorded with great glee by Ms. Skeeter's quill, was going to cause all manner of problems, both for the boy and for himself.

But the Headmaster was forced to admit that Harry's rage was more than understandable. He and his friends had been targeted quite deliberately last term, victims of a plot that nearly cost Harry and the Weasley girl their lives. His violent response to the ambush at the end of the term made even more sense in that context, and he began to wish he'd handled things differently.

Harry's response to these attacks seemed somewhat childish... publicly calling out the Dark-aligned pure-blood families like the

Malfoys, attacking those he blamed for not having done more in years past. While his anger was justifiable, Albus Dumbledore did not see what the boy hoped to gain in doing all this. When he returned to Hogwarts he'd be an even bigger target than before, and not only from Voldemort's former servants. The Ministry would not take this lying down, by any means. He did not look forward to his next meeting with Cornelius – he had no doubt the man would suspect him of playing a role in this. He'd resented Albus not allowing Harry to become a ward of the Ministry after the deaths of his parents, and this interview would, to him, be a justification of his most paranoid fears.

There was little doubt in Professor Dumbledore's mind that this would drive a wedge between Hogwarts and the Ministry. But what he couldn't fathom was why this was happening.

OoOoO

Hermione stayed at The Burrow that night, sharing Ginny's room. In the interests of both convenience and security, the Weasleys offered to bring the Muggle-born girl with them to catch the Hogwarts Express. Since they still had no idea who'd sent the Dementors, Harry could find no fault in their logic.

Molly Weasley was a bit old-fashioned in many ways, and seemed to feel more comfortable drafting the girls to pitch in for dinner. Since Luna had gone home for one last dinner with her father, this meant Hermione received an impromptu review on household charms. Harry was quietly amused, watching Hermione's feminist sensibilities go to war with her desire to learn new things.

Dinner was prepared without too much drama and, as he expected, afterward he was asked to stay in the kitchen to discuss the interview. He knew Molly likely wouldn't approve of some of the things he'd done, but he did catch her a little off balance when he asked that Percy be present for the discussion.

Harry was also inwardly pleased that Sirius was lingering around the kitchen as well. The Weasleys may be his legal guardians, but his godfather was taking his responsibility quite seriously.

By the time he was done explaining his reasons for the pre-emptive strike, Mrs. Weasley wasn't completely convinced, but admitted she could see the sense of his plan. Percy was disturbed to hear of how far the Ministry had sunk in the future timeline, but he did ask a relevant question.

"Why didn't you discuss this with us ahead of time, if you were planning to do it all along?" he asked in that fussy tone that seemed to drive his brothers wild.

Fortunately, Harry wasn't his brother. "I wasn't sure I would be able to do it, not at first. Rita was far more cooperative than I expected. This won't work if she distorts or blunts my words – I made some very specific accusations that will be hard to directly refute. But if she wasn't sincerely cooperative, well, it would have been wasted effort."

Percy nodded slowly as he digested this. Sirius's tight grin needed no explanation.

Eventually, Harry was off the hook and sent off to bed for the early start they had tomorrow. As he passed Ginny's door, he thought he heard muted voices. Shaking his head, he continued on toward the room he shared with Ron.

Girl talk; he was probably better off not knowing.

OoOoO

When they arrived the next day at King's Cross, Harry was a little surprised to see Aurors stationed all around the platform. A pair of very serious-looking men stared at them as they passed through the barrier, and Harry had to resist the urge to slip his wand into his hand.

Arthur, who'd taken the day off to drive them in to London, was grim-faced, but didn't appear to be surprised. Harry caught his eye and raised an eyebrow.

"There've been rumours in the *Daily Prophet*," he murmured as he bent down to straighten Harry's new trunk. "Sirius Black has been reported to be skulking around Hogsmeade and was once seen near the train station."

Harry frowned. He knew those sightings to be false – Sirius hadn't stirred from The Burrow since his close call on Harry's birthday, mostly at Harry's insistence. Someone was planting those rumours for their own purposes. He just didn't know why. What he did know was that he was very glad Arthur had talked Sirius into staying at The Burrow. Even as Padfoot, it would have been far too risky for him to accompany them.

Under the watchful eyes of the Aurors, their goodbyes were quieter and shorter than they might have been. Harry's uneasiness seemed to be contagious.

By unspoken agreement, they all moved toward the train as a group. Even on the crowded platform, Harry noted with pride, they all stayed together. Aside from keeping an eye on the Aurors, Harry also tried to find Neville or Augusta in the crowd. But his search proved fruitless by the time they boarded.

To their surprise, the last compartment was already occupied. *Professor* Lupin was there, a new valise stowed in the overhead luggage shelf. Harry smiled at their mentor, but his grin grew even wider when he saw who Remus had been speaking to.

"Neville!" a mixture of voices exclaimed, making the stocky boy jump. Harry wondered fleetingly if being isolated all summer had affected their friend's confidence.

Ron, of course, broke the ice in his usual manner.

"Good to see you, mate. Now give me a hand with the trunks."

Harry stifled a snicker and Hermione sighed, but Ron's demand seemed to snap Neville out of it. In short order, they had everyone's luggage stowed... but then the compartment grew quiet as they all looked at each other.

Harry was about to open his mouth when Luna beat him to it.

"I'm sorry about your summer, Neville," she said in a very small voice.

Neville frowned and his mouth dropped open for a moment before he spoke.

“Like I told you before,” he finally said, “it’s not your fault. This is just something I have to work out with my gran.”

“But if I hadn’t—” she began before Neville cut her off, something Harry ordinarily never saw the boy do.

“You had no way of knowing,” the dark-haired boy insisted. “I didn’t see this coming and I grew up with her. So, stop it,” he demanded. “Er, please?”

Harry was uncomfortably reminded of a conversation from summer of last year...

Luna bit her lip and looked down, nodding.

Harry guessed he was seeing a replay of their letters, but it was still somewhat painful to watch. Professor Lupin watched the whole thing with a slight smile, making Harry wonder how long Remus and Neville had talked before they arrived.

The train whistle blew again, signalling the last call for passengers. Everyone took a seat. Harry noticed Remus had today’s *Daily Prophet*, so he angled for the spot next to the man, wondering if the interview had been printed yet.

Ginny flounced down between him and the window, but it was her elbow that got his attention as he was turning toward Remus. Harry turned back and saw Neville softly pat the bench next to him as he looked at Luna with one eyebrow raised. The blond girl nodded and took her seat next to him.

Ginny sighed happily and Harry suppressed a grin of his own. Luna had been unusually apprehensive for most of the summer, so it was good to see that her fears seemed, for the most part, to be unfounded.

His good mood became a bit strained as he read the headlines over Remus’ elbow.



*"Boy Who Lived Attacks Ministry, Pure-bloods."*

Harry suppressed his habitual annoyance at the title society seemed overjoyed to bestow upon him. He supposed it would rankle less if it had been based on something he'd actually *done*, or even remembered. At his snort of amusement, Remus folded the paper and Harry apologized for reading over his arm.

The professor gave him a tired grin. "Here," he said, handing Harry the paper. "I'm a bit tired, *as you can guess*, so I'll just take a nap."

Harry nodded slowly. Last night had been a full moon, so he was wondering why Professor Lupin was riding the Express. Harry knew that Professor Dumbledore began supplying him with Wolfsbane Potion as soon as he had accepted the position at Hogwarts, but even when kept artificially calm, the transformation itself was physically draining. "Go ahead," Harry said earnestly. "I'm surprised you didn't go on ahead to the castle."

"Normally I would," Remus replied, cracking a wan smile. "But the Headmaster asked that a couple of professors ride with the Express, just in case."

Harry frowned. "Is it these stories about Sirius Black that have him concerned?" he whispered. "Surely he doesn't believe..."

Remus shook his head. "No, he doesn't. But others do. And there is a lot of pressure being brought to bear. Some measures..." He shook his head as he yawned widely. "Pardon me. I'll get up when the cart comes by and check in with Professor Sprout. In the meantime, I'd ask that you and your friends keep your eyes open. If anything, and I mean anything, odd occurs, please wake me immediately."

Harry nodded firmly. He was touched when he realized why Remus had chosen to sit in their usual car. They'd be his eyes while he recovered from his monthly ordeal. "You can count on us," Harry said.

"I know I can," Remus said as he settled back in his seat and drifted off.

Out of deference for their tutor's slumber, they decided to forgo their normal game of Exploding Snap. Instead, they either read quietly or gazed out the windows as the Express drove north under the increasingly overcast skies.

OoOoO

Harry tried not to think too much about the 'some measures' Remus had mentioned in passing. He had a feeling he'd find out all too soon.

Instead he tried to read ahead for his lessons, which was easier said than done. *Ancient Runes Made Easy* seemed anything but, and *Numerology and Gramatica* wasn't exactly light reading either.

All the same, it was the first time he'd been exposed to something he didn't at least half-remember from his older self's memories. Learning something completely new would be a challenge, which was part of the reason why he'd been so interested in signing up for different electives this time around.

The other part was a little more practical. When they'd embarked on the ill-fated Horcrux Hunt, Hermione insisted on bringing a couple of her NEWT-level textbooks. He and Ron acquiesced, more out of deference to their friend's bookish nature than anything else. It wasn't until she began creating customized versions of different charms and spells that they realized that her wishes were rooted in wholly practical ground.

Being able to retrieve a Horcrux *without* losing a limb was more than enough to make a believer out of Harry.

Hermione was just a trifle smug as she explained how she used what she learned in two of her favourite classes to calculate the wand motions, incantations, and other configurations necessary to change a simple cutting charm into a spray of razor-sharp shards of magical energy. Her new version, though far more destructive, was also much more draining. But that was the trade-off, she'd explained to them. The real science of spell creation was to get the maximum effect for the least energy and effort. Harry thought it sounded more like an art, the way she described it, but he wasn't about to argue with the smartest person he knew.

They still had a little time while Voldemort didn't have a body... a little longer before the second war truly started. Harry hoped that he and the others, working with Hermione, might give them more of an edge before things came to a head.

OoOoO

Between trying to get a head start on Arithmancy, subtly watching Neville and Luna quietly converse, and occasionally dozing off, time passed quickly for Harry as the Hogwarts Express drove north.

The skies overhead grew steadily darker and more overcast, and he tried to suppress a shudder. He had an idea of the 'measures' the Ministry was taking, but he hoped he was wrong.

As the rain began and the late afternoon became as dark as twilight, Harry stared apprehensively at the windows. Still, the train continued moving, and his heart began to lighten. They were well past the point where the Dementors had stopped them the first time around when he let out a relieved sigh.

Ginny looked at him curiously, but didn't ask.

The sight of familiar hills in the distance made Harry smile – they were near their destination.

At first, Harry thought they were slowing for the Hogsmeade station, but the train was braking too much, too early for that to be the case. The train came to a halt a little more than a mile away from Hogsmeade. He peered out the window, dreading what he would discover.

When dark-cloaked figures began to emerge from the misty gloom, Harry frantically reached for the wand strapped to his wrist. But a sudden thought stopped him. Conjuring a Patronus here and now would lead to far too many questions that he didn't want to answer – even from Remus.

As the Dementors approached, a chill seemed to seep through the windows to find a home in Harry's bones. Despite that, he tried to make himself relax. Professor Lupin and Professor Sprout were with

the train for a reason. The Dementors were only supposed to be looking for Sirius Black.

Harry deliberately took his hand off his wand and began concentrating on reinforcing his Occlumency barriers. He hoped that would at least make it harder for the creatures to dredge up his worst memories.

But there were just so many for them to choose from...

Harry stumbled back to his seat. "I'm not feeling too well," he murmured as the lights switched off. Faintly at first, but growing ever louder, he heard the murmur of voices wailing with grief and loss, punctuated by explosions. One of those voices, he knew, was his own. He tried to sink deeper and deeper within himself, isolating his mind, protecting it. But the sounds grew steadily louder.

He felt Ginny's hand on his arm as a more personal darkness claimed him.

OoOoO

When he regained consciousness, the lights were on again and the train felt like it was just slowing to a stop. He blinked and heard Ginny let out a sigh of relief.

"He's awake now," she announced in a hoarse whisper.

"Are you all right, Harry?" Professor Lupin asked, leaning over him with a concerned expression on his face.

Harry nodded and slowly sat up.

"Here, eat all of this," Lupin said in a no-nonsense tone of voice as he handed Harry a large bar of Honeydukes' chocolate.

Harry accepted the bar without expression. He blinked and snapped his head up, glancing at his friends. All were present and accounted for within the car.

“They’re all right, Harry,” Professor Lupin assured him. “You had, by far, the worst reaction.”

Harry sighed. “Without the wards in the way... I heard them dying,” he whispered.

Lupin’s face went grey, but he just nodded as this seemed to confirm what he suspected. Hermione’s swift intake of breath was shockingly loud in the silence. Only the low murmur of passengers in neighbouring cars reminded them of where they were.

Ginny’s hand tightened on Harry’s and he wasn’t embarrassed to realize that she’d been holding it all this time. He squeezed back before letting go. His fingers mechanically tore open the paper on the chocolate. It wasn’t until the warmth began to spread from his stomach that he realized how cold he’d been.

He looked up when Hermione cleared her throat. Like the others, she was still looking a little washed out, but her jaw was set in a determined line. “I think we should all practice a bit more on the Patronus Charm,” she said firmly.

No one disagreed.

OoOoO

The Gryffindor Six, as they came to be known, were still a bit subdued when they parted company from Professor Lupin and made their way to one of the carriages for the short ride to the castle. Fortunately, no one insisted that Harry needed to visit Madam Pomfrey, or otherwise made a big deal about his passing out. Slipping into a sort of trance was a bit less embarrassing than collapsing in a fit, but the fact remained that, without his Patronus, he was much more susceptible to Dementors than his friends.

Most of their fellow students also seemed less than pleased at encountering the creatures. Several of the younger students were still visibly upset, or appeared afraid. Not that they didn’t have good reason.

Harry's spirits didn't completely revive until dinner, when Dumbledore's announcements began. The Headmaster's displeasure at having Dementors near his school was quite apparent to Harry. Dumbledore's warnings about the foul creatures surrounding the grounds and patrolling Hogsmeade didn't reassure the frightened students in the slightest. Harry could pick up a few faint flashes of anger in those twinkling blue eyes and knew he'd been forced to accept them, just as before. He hoped no one was foolish enough to try and sneak past the quartet guarding the gates in this timeline.

Harry wondered if he could see the Headmaster's anger easier now or maybe it was because the old man knew the so-called 'threat' posed by Sirius Black was a fabrication.

In any event, Dumbledore had his professional demeanour firmly in place when he announced the new faculty members. The reactions to these announcements, however, varied widely.

When it was announced that Professor Emeritus Horace Slughorn was returning to teach Potions, there was scattered applause from all tables. Harry had no doubt that many students had parents who were protégés of Slughorn – the man's contacts were scattered far and wide throughout Wizarding Society, and those parents no doubt alerted their children to the opportunities he represented. For his own part, Harry made a show of politely clapping his hands. For an instant, the round little man caught Harry's eye, and the Boy That Lived knew he'd been marked. He chuckled. Smarminess aside, anything would be better than Snape.

That good mood improved further when Professor Dumbledore announced Hagrid's appointment as professor for Care of Magical Creatures. Harry stood up as he applauded, followed by his friends, and soon most of the Gryffindor table had joined in. Hagrid's face was red as a tomato by the time they'd quieted down.

The introduction of Remus Lupin was curiously mixed as well. As with Hagrid, the Slytherin table seemed determined to ignore him, while the Gryffindors acknowledged him as a former alumnus. Several of the Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs who'd seen him handle the

Dementors were likewise enthusiastic in their endorsement of the new Defence Against the Dark Arts professor.

After the meal, they sought out Hagrid to congratulate him on his new position.

"It's all thanks you," he said thickly as he gently patted Harry's shoulder, nearly driving him to his knees. "With you lot discoverin' what really happen wit' th' Chamber and all..." He visibly caught himself before he said more than he should. "Well, Professor Dumbledore lobbied the Board of Governors to reverse my expulsion. Great man, he is! I can even get a wand now, if I want to."

"Are you?" Harry asked quickly.

"I dunno," Hagrid said, frowning uncertainly. "It's been a long time since my last classes, I probably forgot everthin'..."

"Hagrid," Hermione interjected. "That's no reason not to try! It's not your fault you were wrongfully accused, and it's despicable how you were punished with no real proof... But it will be your fault if you don't do something about it now. Don't you want to learn magic?" she asked. Harry noticed Ron ducking his head down, refusing to meet the eyes of their classmates as they filed past them toward the dormitories.

Hermione was on a tear, but Harry knew she was right. "She's got a point there, Hagrid. If you don't learn magic now, then Tom Riddle will have won in the end, right?"

Hagrid's eyes flashed darkly at the mention of his old classmate. "Yer righ', both of ye. I'll talk to Professor Dumbledore right now."

Harry smiled widely as he watched Hagrid march back up to the head table. Though their words were inaudible, Harry noticed the Headmaster's eyebrows lift slightly in surprise, and then a faint smile creased his face. He nodded slowly as he spoke, but his eyes wandered past the bulky form of his groundskeeper... and found Harry's. Dumbledore's face didn't change expression, but he did make a fractional nod before Harry turned away.

Not for the first time, Harry wished his own Legilimency was up to the task of reading the old wizard's thoughts. Did he understand? Was he finally getting with the program? Or was he just trying to draw Harry out? But there were no easy answers for the Boy Who Lived, so he was left frozen with indecision.

"You seem to have had quite an effect on him," a quiet voice observed.

Harry flinched in spite of himself, spinning around to see Professor Slughorn standing right behind him. The old man's gooseberry-coloured eyes seemed to bore into Harry's, but he didn't feel the slightest touch of Legilimency. Then a smile lifted the corners of the huge silvery moustache. "It's odd to finally be meeting you at last," Slughorn said in an unctuous tone.

"Er, yeah," Harry stammered.

"Don't worry," the short little man assured him. "I'm over here to warn you off about pursuing any vendettas against members of my house, and threaten to have you removed from Hogwarts if there are any more incidents like last year."

Harry's uneasy smile froze in place as Ron began to sputter.

"Of course," Slughorn continued, "that's what I let them believe I was doing when I came over here. You know, line in the sand and all that. I taught that same technique to Madam Bagnold back before she became Minister. She didn't forget it either – gave me advance notice on all kinds of things. Saved me a Galleon or two on my investments, let me tell you!"

Harry blinked. A ruse. He wondered if his mind was still foggy from the Dementors.

"Anyway, I've let it be known that I'm going to have it out with you, and when I hold the next House meeting, they'll know that I got you to agree to suspend all hostilities, as long as they don't start anything new. That is what Professor Dumbledore said you wanted, yes? To be left alone?" Slughorn waggled his eyebrows in such a comical fashion that Harry heard Ginny squeak beside him.



Harry nodded. "That's all we've ever—"

"Good! Good!" Slughorn enthused. "Of course, after a couple of weeks, we'll have to work on some social activities to thaw out relations between Slytherin and Gryffindor. You'll work with me on that, right, Harry?" Slughorn asked in an innocently earnest tone.

Harry sighed. He knew from the moment he wrote the retired Potions Master that this would be a consequence. There was no escaping the Slug Club. "We'll be happy to, Professor. All of us."

"That's the spirit, Harry!" Slughorn commended him. "People are already talking about you and your friends. 'Gryffindor Six', 'top marks in their year', I tell you, Harry, with my help, you'll go far!" Then he cleared his throat and glanced back toward the Slytherin table. Harry could see several people watching this conversation with varying degrees of subtlety. "Right!" Slughorn continued in a louder voice. "See that it doesn't!"

With chin raised, and moustache aquiver, the Head of Slytherin house returned to his table and led them out of the Great Hall.

"D'you think any of them fell for that?" Ron asked dubiously.

"They followed Draco, didn't they?" Harry shot back. Ron shrugged.

Mindful of the milling crowds of students, they were quiet as they made their way up to the Gryffindor tower. Percy gave them a small nod as he concluded his lecture to the first-year students. Harry wasn't sure if it was his imagination or not, but the Head Boy didn't seem to act nearly as pompous as he remembered from the original timeline. Had Harry's revelations about corruption within the Ministry shaken the boy's confidence, at least a little? If this was the effect, he wasn't really sure he minded... he'd also have to keep an eye on Fred and George as well. He knew the estrangement between Percy and his family wasn't entirely one-sided.

Harry shook his head as he almost stumbled going up the stairs. There would be time enough to think about that tomorrow, perhaps when he was feeling a bit sharper. He nodded hello to Seamus and Dean as they entered the third-years' room, but made a bee-line for

his new trunk. He was barely able to refrain from yawning as he dressed for bed and lay down. The low murmur of Ron and Seamus talking Quidditch as he pulled the curtains shut was almost soothing, in an odd way.

Harry soon discovered that there was at least one positive side to the ordeal he had undergone on the train... he was so exhausted, mentally and emotionally, that he was asleep the instant his head touched the pillow and had no dreams at all that he could remember. He'd wonder, later, if the Dementors had exhausted the nightmares, at least for a night.

OoOoO

Harry was still a little groggy the following morning as he made his way down to the Great Hall for breakfast. For some reason he'd been unable to wake up early to work out, and Ron and the others decided to let him have a bit of a lie in. He knew they were just worried about him after his reaction to the Dementors, but he still felt a bit crabby about the whole thing. Still, there was nothing to do about it now. His class schedule said he had Arithmancy first thing in the morning, so he wanted to make sure he had a good start on the day.

Ron, of course, took this idea to ridiculous extremes, falling on his breakfast like a starving wolf. Hermione looked faintly nauseated as their friend quickly worked his way through a heavily-laden plate. Although her scolding was fairly mild, she rolled her eyes when Ron protested that he was 'still a growing boy'.

Harry had to suppress a grin. Lane or not, Ron's words were truer than anyone else knew. In time he'd be even taller than Bill, but with Charlie's husky build – a born Keeper, as he'd said on more than one occasion. There was some irony in the youngest Weasley boy growing up to be the largest, not that any of his family had been around to appreciate the humour.

Harry scowled and bit off the end of a sausage. That was not a productive line of thought to be pursuing. He was so preoccupied trying to lighten his mood that he almost missed the glances exchanged by Hermione and Ginny.

Knowing he was barely fit to talk to, Harry occupied himself with his breakfast, letting his eyes roam around the hall. Most of the students seemed subdued as well, though whether the impending classes or the Dementors were to blame was anybody's guess. At the head table, Slughorn was oddly jovial, sitting next to Dumbledore and holding forth about something. Harry guessed that his house meeting last night must have gone fairly well. The other professors seemed to be quietly talking amongst themselves as well, all except for Hagrid.

For some reason the new Care of Magical Creatures professor seemed preoccupied, almost... pensive? For the bluff and hearty groundskeeper that was a most unusual look. From what Harry remembered, he should have been very eager to begin his new teaching career, and had even lined up a special treat for his students... Buckbeak the hippogriff.

Harry blinked and set his fork down. "*With Malfoy gone, that can't happen again, right?*" he mused. "*Still, it can't hurt to take precautions, can it?*"

Harry hurriedly finished his food and was up and out of his seat as Hagrid left the Great Hall early, his breakfast half-eaten. Coming up behind the large man in the corridor, he coughed and asked, "Looking forward to your first class, *Professor* Hagrid?" he asked.

"Oh! Hello there, Harry," Hagrid said, half-turning. "Yeah, got ever'thing lined up. Going ter give them a special surprise today too, get things started off with a bang." He paused. "I kind of wish you lot were able to be there, seeing as how you made it possible," he concluded sadly.

Harry felt like he'd been punched in the stomach. He hadn't thought about it, in his enthusiasm to learn Arithmancy and Ancient Runes, but *not* taking Care of Magical Creatures would have its own effect on things. Evidently, their friendly presence at that first class had encouraged Hagrid more than they knew. "Sorry about that," he muttered.

"Oh, don' mind me," Hagrid said. "Ye had no way of knowing."

Harry silently cursed himself as he forced a smile onto his face. "I suppose," he said. "So what is the big surprise?" he asked in a conspiratorial whisper.

Hagrid quickly looked left and right. "I got some hippogriffs from the school herd, including my favourite, Buckbeak. They got a real taste for rodents and after fumigating the dungeons right before start of term, I had enough rats and such to get them willing to meet my classes today."

Harry blinked in surprise at the thought of Hagrid needing to bribe his subjects, and raised his estimation of Buckbeak's intelligence a few more notches. "Er, that will be brilliant!" he enthused in what he hoped was a believable manner. "But... didn't I read that hippogriffs are a bit ticklish if shown disrespect? It might be trouble if someone starts acting up, you know."

Hagrid nodded. "I'll explain to them before hand that y' got ter show a hippogriff proper respect. Buckbeak's a good lad, as long as they don't insult him or the others..." his voice trailed off as Harry gave him an *extremely* dubious expression. "You don't think someone would deliberately act out, do ye, Harry?"

Harry shrugged. "I'd just be careful, that's all. Some people were raised to think that magical creatures are just stupid beasts, so showing proper respect to this Buckbeak will be well beyond them. And if one of them got hurt, even if it was their own fault, do you think the Ministry would give Buckbeak a fair hearing?"

It was slightly dirty pool, playing on Hagrid's own mistreatment after he was falsely accused of opening the Chamber of Secrets, but it was effective. "Ye got a point there, Harry. I'll keep a tight rein on things. Anyone acting up will get sent straight ter Filch, ye can count on that." Then Hagrid smiled. "Ye say ye read about hippogriffs?"

"Yeah, someone got me the *Monster Book of Monsters* for my birthday," Harry replied with a smile.

Hagrid reddened a bit. "Well, if you want, you can come down after classes and I'll introduce ye," he offered tentatively.

Harry nodded. "Do you mind if the others come?" he asked.

Hagrid looked a little surprised. "No, of course not. All of ye are welcome," he assured Harry.

Harry grinned again as students began to fill the corridor from the Great Hall. "I need to get to class, but we'll see you this afternoon," he promised.

OoOoO

Even after lunch, Harry's head was still spinning. There was a *lot* more to Arithmancy than he'd anticipated, and Professor Vector promised to be quite a taskmaster. She'd even assigned an essay the first class, asking them to fill two feet of parchment listing out the reasons why they wanted to study Arithmancy, and what they expected to do with what they'd learn.

Ron looked particularly dubious about this, as some of *his* major reasons he didn't really care to discuss with a witch as formidable in her own way as Professor McGonagall. It wasn't until Harry suggested discussing battlefield tactics and duelling strategies that his friend's expression had gone from panicked to thoughtful.

Hermione, of course, was right in her element, and had apparently already composed most of her answer in her head before they finished eating. Neville was quiet, but didn't seem overly perturbed about the assignment. Ginny and Luna, clearly not wanting to be completely left out, asked quite a few questions about the new class and its professor. Harry had little doubt that one or both of them would be taking it next year as well.

The third years had also had Transfiguration that morning, and while it was more familiar, Professor McGonagall was never what one would consider an 'easy' instructor. At least their summer practice had kept their wand-work sharp.

They made plans to get the study group together after dinner, all the better to start on their new assignments. However, before the evening meal, they all paid a visit to Hagrid. The early evening air was still

quite raw from the previous day's storms, leaving their breath misting in the damp.

Fortunately, when they arrived at the groundskeeper's hut, he'd already had the kettle on. The strong hot tea he served was welcome after being outside, and Harry discovered, to his amazement, that Hagrid's ubiquitous rock cakes were somewhat edible when you dipped a corner in one's tea and nibbled carefully.

"I'm glad you said that this morning," Hagrid said as he finished pouring.

"Oh?" Harry asked.

"Aye. Crabbe and Goyle started acting up this afternoon. One of them said something he shouldn't have, and if I hadn't gotten between them and old Bucky..." he said, plucking at a fresh rent in the sleeve of his moleskin coat, "Well, it might have been bad."

Harry winced. "I always thought those two were lacking in good sense."

Hagrid nodded. "Well, the two of them will spending their evenings with Filch for the next couple of weeks. Can't have students not respectin' the creatures they study. Ain't safe for nobody when that happens." He shook his head. "They even complained ter Professor Dumbledore about th' detention, and we had a meetin' about it."

"What did he say?" Hermione asked, concerned.

Hagrid grinned suddenly, his great white teeth gleaming amidst the tangled black beard. "Great man, Professor Dumbledore is, great man. He told them they'd been very foolish to disregard my warnings, and since I got hurt protecting them from their own foolishness, then they might even owe me a life debt."

Ron and Neville both let out strangled barks of laughter. Ginny held hers in, but her eyes were flashing with amusement in a way that was rather distracting.

“Of course,” Hagrid continued, “I knew Buckbeak wouldn’t really hurt anyone, so I couldn’t press a claim, but that shut them up right on the spot. And before we left, Professor Slughorn added another week of detention, on account of them embarrassing the Slytherin house.”

Most of his friends looked rather amazed at that, so Harry spoke up. “Professor Slughorn was Head of Slytherin before Professor Snape, and I think his policies were a bit different. He didn’t favour students from his own house quite so much. In fact, I found out that my mum was one of his favourites, and she was in Gryffindor.”

“Yer spot on about that, Harry,” Hagrid said, getting a little misty. “There was some folks who were a bit surprised at that, but yer mum had a way about her... People liked her in spite of themselves, an’ even those that didn’t, still respected her.”

Harry was caught completely off guard by Hagrid’s words, never having heard Lily Evans described in quite such a fashion before. He resolved on the spot that he would not let himself grow distant from the man who’d introduced him to the Wizarding world.

After tea, Hagrid led them out to the paddock and whistled for Buckbeak. After cautioning them again about showing respect, he led the reluctant hippogriff into the clearing. Harry stepped forward, somewhat confident, but still respectful. Cognizant that the poor creature had been stared at by Hogwarts students all day long, he dropped to one knee as he bowed, reasoning that a little extra respect couldn’t hurt. He knew all too well what it was like to be stared at all day.

Fortunately, everyone passed inspection and Buckbeak consented to a light currying. He might have been a little tired from the previous excitement, since he showed no desire to go flying this time around. Harry was just as relieved as he was disappointed. While it had been exciting enough in his borrowed memories, the air was growing chill and he had no desire to draw more attention onto himself if he could avoid it.

As they walked back to Hagrid’s hut, Hermione asked the large man what he had planned for his next class. Harry knew that being a professor was one potential career that the bushy-haired witch was

considering, but after Hagrid's remarks about Harry's warning, he suspected that she had an ulterior motive.

Harry realized that Hermione must have read Hagrid's textbook, or a similar book at some point, because she knew exactly what he was talking about when he mentioned bringing in a Niffler for the next class. Her motivations were a mystery, right up until she frowned.

"Hagrid?" she asked, "Nifflers are strongly attracted to shiny objects, aren't they?"

"That's right," Hagrid nodded, pleased that she knew. "Should be quite a surprise when I show him digging up a Galleon I buried that morning."

"What if some of the students are wearing jewellery? Won't the Niffler become hard to control?" she asked, concerned. "There have been reports of them biting off rings and necklaces; someone could get hurt if you don't warn them first."

Hagrid frowned. "I hadn't thought o' that, Hermione," he admitted. "It's no wonder Professor McGonagall is always going on about how clever ye are."

Hermione's face went bright red, but Hagrid didn't notice as he dug a grubby sheaf of parchments out of his pocket and carefully added notes with a quill that looked ridiculously small in his enormous fingers.

As they made their way back to the castle for dinner, Harry congratulated his friend. "That was a good thought there, Hermione," he said.

She just shrugged. "I just don't want to see Hagrid get into any trouble," she said.

"Well, his students will be thanking you too," Ron observed. "It's kind of scary how things like that just never occurred to him."



“Part of it isn’t his fault,” Harry insisted. “He’s just so... big... that things like an offended hippogriff just don’t seem like a problem to him.”

“That makes sense,” Neville said.

“Well,” Ginny added, “we have a standing invitation, so we can come out each week and ask him about what new creature he’s going to cover, and try to anticipate any problems like we did today.”

“We?” Ron asked weakly.

“Uhm,” Ginny temporized, “Hermione will. And we will keep her company while she does it,” she added with an impish grin.

Laughter trailed them back into the castle.

OoOoO

Potions class with Professor Slughorn was substantially different from what Harry’s friends had come to expect. Harry had already been thinking about teaching styles after their conversation with Hagrid, so he noticed a few things after they filed into the dungeon laboratory with the Slytherin third years.

Some things were the same, of course. The glares from Pansy Parkinson, Vincent Crabbe, and Gregory Goyle were just as venomous as Harry expected. What he didn’t expect was how Professor Slughorn segregated the two houses, pulled out his wand, and placed a magical barrier between the enemy camps.

“There have been reports,” he said in a serious tone at odds with his jovial features, “of rampant sabotage in this class. My predecessor’s notes were especially concerned with this year. As such, I will not tolerate any foolishness of that sort in my classroom. Some of the potions we will be brewing can be quite dangerous if tampered with, and I will not have any of my students reporting to the hospital wing if I can help it. Is that clear, Mr. Potter?”

Harry nodded gravely, as he struggled to keep a smile off of his face. In truth, most of the sabotaging was done by the Slytherins, though

Draco and the others blamed the Gryffindors any time *their* potion came out less than perfect. Slughorn's magical barrier would hinder Pansy and the rest far more than it would help them. But they couldn't protest without revealing their previous lies. In short, it was brilliantly devious – aiding those Slughorn wished to curry favour with, and discreetly punishing those he didn't wish to be seen as actively hindering.

No wonder he was head of Slytherin.

As the Slytherin students sat fuming, while most of the Gryffindors looked gobsmacked, the Potions master began lecturing. Or rather, he began chatting with them.

Instead of the demonstration potions Harry expected – perhaps he saved those for the N.E.W.T. level class – Professor Slughorn began by introducing himself and asking each member of the class a couple of questions about themselves. After each answer, he'd ask them a question or two regarding potion-making. Harry guessed that he was looking for potential contacts, as well as getting a feel for their general grasp of the subject matter. The interspersing of the academic with the personal also seemed to keep everyone slightly off-balance and, on the average, more attentive. In a way, Harry had to admire his style; Slughorn always seemed to keep a careful balance of self-interest with professional standards, never wholly discarding one for the other. It was almost artistic. Maybe his conduct was also a performance for the benefit of the young Slytherins he was responsible for...

If that was the case, Harry concluded, they could do far worse. Working to further one's ambitions *without* harming the rest of society seemed to be beyond the capabilities of the Malfoys or the other dark pure-blood families... even if that lack of malignancy vastly improved their long-term prospects. Harry realized that Slughorn wanted to use him to further his own plans, but at the same time, the round little man would also do his best to manipulate things to Harry's advantage. Mutually beneficial relationships were logically more viable in the long run. He didn't necessarily *trust* the man to do anything that didn't serve his own interests, but Harry would go out of his way to make

sure that their interests remained congruent – which meant that Professor Slughorn would be looking out for *them* as much as himself.

Harry's thoughts were cut off abruptly as his name was called. "So, Mister Potter," Slughorn observed coolly, though his eyes seemed somewhat amused, "I understand you are quite active in the Duelling Association, yes?"

Harry nodded slowly.

"And I suppose you think potions are useless in such a venue?" Slughorn asked archly, causing several of the Slytherins, especially Pansy, to smirk as he put Harry on the spot.

"Absolutely not, sir," Harry replied evenly. "Even Muggle soldiers have members of their combat units assigned to carry bandages and Muggle medicines. Potions are usually more reliable for curing burns and other types of spell-damage than medical charms, which can be quite tricky. If I was going into a situation where I was expecting a fight, I'd prefer to have a few common remedies and pain-relieving potions handy. Some potions can also be used in a more... direct... manner, if one can contrive an appropriate means of delivery. Even something as simple as Zonko's Belching Powder can give you a decisive advantage – it's hard to cast a spell when you are constantly belching."

"I see," Slughorn said, slightly nonplussed. "I understand you were raised by Muggles? What was that like?"

Harry frowned at the extremely personal question. "Rather unpleasant. My aunt and her family disliked my mother and hated the idea of magic. If it weren't for meeting people like the Grangers, I might have ended up thinking rather poorly of Muggles as a whole."

Slughorn blinked as he digested this, and then moved on to Ron. Harry had to suppress the urge to turn around and see who might be staring at him.

OoOoO

At lunch that day, Harry ate very little. Despite Ginny's protests, he only picked at the small amount of food on his plate, and left early to go back to his room. Ron and Neville offered to take him to see Madam Pomfrey, but Harry just waved them off. "You go on to class," he said, glancing over at Seamus. "If I'm not feeling better by dinner time, I'll go see her myself."

After they left, Harry stretched out on his bed. Unless something changed, the Boggart would be found in the staffroom again, inspiring Professor Lupin to use it for a demonstration. He had absolutely no desire to have any of his deepest fears paraded around for public display. The chances of revealing something disastrous were just too high. As much as he hated the idea of skiving off from Professor Lupin's first class, it was really the only prudent thing to do, under the circumstances.

And so Harry occupied his time working on his Arithmancy homework until he actually dozed off. He awoke with a start at the sound of Ron's voice.

"That was brilliant, mate," the red-head enthused, "making that Death Eater's mask slip down and cover his eyes, right before he fell on his arse!"

"She," Neville corrected quietly.

"He, she, hard to tell under those robes," Ron shrugged, frowning. "That Boggart looked so real, I almost lost my lunch when that spider appeared on my turn."

"You still made its legs fall off," Dean said. "I thought Lavender was going to scream when it rolled toward her," he continued with a laugh.

"I suppose," Ron agreed as he dumped his bag on his bed. "Harry, it's too bad you missed Lupin's first class. It was brilliant, he had a Boggart and showed us how to stop one and..."

Harry shrugged. "I wasn't feeling too well earlier, probably wouldn't have been a good idea," he temporized. Neville gave him a quick look.

Ron frowned. "Oh, yeah. How's your stomach now? You still look a little peaked. Do you need to...?"

Harry shook his head. "I think it was just something I ate. I'm actually a little hungry now."

"Well good," Ron said happily. "We're just getting ready to go down to dinner now. We'll get you fed up in a hurry."

Harry shook his head ruefully as he got up and stretched. "You know, sometimes you sound so much like your mum that it's scary."

Ron's indignant sputters continued all the way back down to the common room.

OoOoO

Professor Lupin seemed to accept Harry's apologies for missing his class, and nothing more was said as they moved on to cover other Dark creatures. Examining his memories, it seemed to Harry that the Defence curriculum was covering a bit more spellwork than he originally remembered. Of course, Professor Lupin had some forewarning this time regarding the sad state of affairs left by his predecessors.

It was with great difficulty that Harry refrained from dwelling on the damage that affairs at Hogwarts had inflicted on Wizarding Britain. The curse on the Defence Against the Dark Arts position practically guaranteed that an entire generation had very little idea how to defend themselves against Voldemort's followers or anyone else who came along. Snape's policies regarding his N.E.W.T.-level Potions class also sharply limited the number of potential Aurors the Ministry could recruit.

Something General Hastings had once said stuck in Harry's mind: "All real power flows from the end of a wand." The weakness rotting away the core of society was concealed as long as Dumbledore was there to hold Voldemort in check – *the only one he really feared*. But once the Headmaster was gone, there wasn't really anything to hold back the Darkness. The Order of the Phoenix tried, but they were more of an information-gathering auxiliary – they were better trained than

most of the younger Aurors, but the same could be said of the *students* he trained in 'Dumbledore's Army'.

With Harry's surety regarding Voldemort's return, Professor Lupin also seemed to be aware of this danger. The snippets he overheard from Percy and the older students suggested that the genial-looking man was quite the taskmaster with the O.W.L.- and N.E.W.T.-preparation classes. *They* may have thought he was working solely to ensure they passed their exams, but Harry knew better. There was even a rumour that students sufficiently far behind on Defence were being *strongly* urged to join the Duelling Association to hone their practical skills.

With Professor Lupin's attention focused on whipping the Defence classes into shape, Harry was a little surprised when he received a note at lunch the week after Hermione's birthday.

*Please report to my quarters following your afternoon classes.*

*—R. J. Lupin*

Harry showed up at the appointed time, though doing so did require reminding Ron that Lupin could be trusted, perhaps more than anyone else on staff. If he was going to write lines or serve detention for missing class, he didn't want to do so with an audience, and he felt Professor Lupin would appreciate one even less.

But when Harry knocked, the man who opened the door didn't seem angry or disappointed. "Ah, there you are," he said with a genial smile. "Follow me and I will explain." After locking his door, he led a confused Harry through the corridors to the Defence classroom.

Several of the student desks had been pushed aside, and a large packing case was sitting on top of the professor's desk. It looked vaguely familiar and Harry felt his stomach drop.

"I'll admit I was rather surprised when you were not in my first class," Professor Lupin said quietly as he locked the door behind them. "From your records, you never missed a class unless forcibly restrained by Madam Pomfrey. It was then that I realized that you had

somehow discovered, probably from Mr. Filch's grumblings, that I was going to cover Boggarts."

Harry opened his mouth, but was forestalled by Lupin's dismissive gesture as he leaned against the doorframe.

"I can understand such a reaction," Lupin continued. "In fact, I can appreciate your desire for some discretion. Some peoples' deepest fears are worse than others, and perhaps shouldn't be aired in public. If you'd faced a Boggart that turned into a representation of Voldemort, it might have caused a panic." Lupin lightly placed his hand on Harry's shoulder. "On the other hand, facing one's fears can be therapeutic, in a way. I remember how you reacted to the training target, Harry, so I'm offering you a chance to do so in a private setting, and perhaps make up your class grade."

Harry opened his mouth to protest. He really didn't want to face a Boggart, even with an audience of one, but he didn't know how to object without talking about... "Thank you, Professor Lupin," he finally said in a low voice.

Lupin's eyebrows knitted together, but Harry didn't volunteer anything else. "Well, there's another one in the case that we found in Mr. Filch's office. You know the incantation is *Riddikulus*... Do you know what frightens you the most?"

Harry nodded slowly as he stepped forward into the area cleared of desks. But what form could a Boggart take to symbolize the immutability of fate? What colour was predestination? What hue futility?

He almost didn't notice at first when Professor Lupin opened the case with a flick of his wand. He braced himself as *something* seemed to peer at him as the lid flew open...

Author Notes: Yes, it's been a while. This story isn't going away, but factors in the story, as well as outside situations have been holding it up a bit. I'm trying not to release any chapters smaller than 10,000 words, so it's been a while. (My beta had a better idea for where to end this one, so I have a head start on chapter 33.) My blog has the

progress meters for the chapters I'm currently working on, so you can check that if you are curious. The link is in my profile.

Regarding this chapter, I've been working on the pacing a bit. This chapter spans the time covered by chapters 4, 5, 6, & 7 of the Prisoner of Azkaban, with some groundwork laying, character development, and bit o' magical action. Bit of a oops at the end there, eh?

And yes, I know magical trunks are a bit of a cliché, but really... Harry saw it used in book 4, he has a need for one and a lot of money... it would be *stupid* of him to ignore their existence, wouldn't it? Sometimes a plot device becomes overused and clichéd simply because it *makes sense*. Hermione hitting the books to research a solution to a problem is just as much a cliché, isn't it?



## Chapter 33

In Harry's defence, it could be said that familiarity with his nightmares had worn some of the corners off of them. When one has the same dream repeatedly over the course of a couple of years, some details tend to become slightly blurred. But the Boggart's magic didn't care about familiarity and didn't care about the passage of time. The creature's unique magical defence seized on the strongest negatively-associated image in Harry's mind and reproduced it in exquisite, loving detail for its victim.

Harry's breath froze in his lungs as he saw an older Ginny sprawled dead on the desk. Details that hadn't consciously registered that horrible day were reproduced down to the last spatter of blood. The artificially pale face, robbed of all circulation; the bones protruding from her wand arm, the stub of wood still clenched between two fingers; the broken and bent legs; the shredded and burned robe. Glimpses of torn underclothes.

Harry's wand was in his hand, but it was shaking so hard he couldn't raise it. He knew he was supposed to come up with a way to make this humorous, to *laugh* at it, but there wasn't anything remotely funny in his mind right now. He clamped down on his Occlumency shields, trying to rob the Boggart of any input. The image wavered slightly as he heard the scrape of desks around him beginning to move.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Professor Lupin lunge towards him, clearly trying to distract the Boggart. He'd taken two steps, dodging around the desks moving away from Harry. He almost reached the Boy Who Lived before something unseen flung him toward the doorway with stunning force.

Suddenly Ginny was replaced by a sprawled corpse, mangled beyond recognition, only a few tufts of short red hair visible through the blood and gore that covered the head. Harry gritted his teeth as Ron's corpse was replaced with an older version of Hermione, face deathly pale, but with her throat a red ruin that cascaded down to cover her blouse. It took a moment for Harry to realize that the animal growl he heard was coming from himself. Then Luna and Neville

appeared in quick succession, their eyes glassy from the Killing Curse. Then a final figure that wasn't dead.

The red-slitted eyes locked onto Harry's as Voldemort's victorious smirk spread across his features. The red silken robes rustled as the Dark Lord almost lazily raised his wand, the green glow of the Killing Curse already lighting the tip.

"I've already won, Potter," it seemed to hiss as Harry's scar exploded with well-remembered pain.

"NO!" Harry screamed at the top of his lungs. "*Singularis Nex!*" he roared, the simple Boggart-banishing hex forgotten. The much-abused student desks, already pushed back to the walls, shattered to kindling behind him as a mote of pure darkness shot from his wand. Half-forgotten reflexes came to the fore and he dived and rolled to the side to avoid the counterstroke, coming up on one knee to blast Voldemort when he dodged Harry's initial strike...

Only to watch the ersatz Dark Lord stare in confusion at onrushing doom. The pulsing ball of blackness travelled far slower than most curses, but that didn't matter if its target didn't move. When it struck the transformed Boggart it exploded with mind-numbing force and Harry had to shield his eyes with his hand.

When Harry lowered his arm, the Boggart was gone. As was the packing case, Professor Lupin's desk, the bookshelves, and all the other furnishings at that end of the room. Not even dust remained on the scorched stones, some of which showed hairline cracks.

Harry swallowed and turned, still on one knee, toward the entrance to the classroom. With a quiet groan, Remus Lupin sat up, blinking owlishly and rubbing at the back of his head.

Harry froze in place for a moment, heart pounding, as the rage in his heart was abruptly replaced by chagrin.

*This has gone utterly pear-shaped.*

OoOoO

Professor Dumbledore's eyes widened behind his spectacles as he stiffened. Professor McGonagall stared at him curiously. Professor Sprout was just giving them, along with the Potions teacher and School Matron, an update on the greenhouses when the Headmaster felt a disturbance in the wards.

As the Headmaster of Hogwarts, he held ultimate control of the castle's defences, but he was surprised his colleagues didn't themselves feel the flare of magic that had occurred within the school.

It was their turn to jump as a low-pitched boom rumbled throughout the castle. Professor Slughorn choked on a piece of crystallized pineapple and began coughing.

"Albus?" Professor McGonagall asked, an eyebrow raised in concern as Madam Pomfrey gave the round little Potion master a sharp blow to the middle of his back.

Dumbledore rose to his feet with a speed that belied his age. "That came from one of the classrooms," he said as he threw open the door to the staff room. As one, the professors followed their headmaster out the door.

OoOoO

Harry shakily climbed to his feet. Professor Lupin let out a low moan as he cradled his head in his hands. Recalling the loud thump the man had made when he struck the doorframe, Harry rushed over to check on him.

Even through the faded brown hair, Harry could see a large knot forming on the back of the man's head. Head injuries were tricky, even if the victim was still conscious, so Harry resolved to get Remus to the hospital wing quick sticks.

"Let's get you to Madam Pomfrey, Professor," Harry said quietly as he got a good grip on the defence professor's shoulder. Remus started to nod, but winced instead. His eyes screwed shut with pain.

As he helped Remus blindly climb to his feet, Harry couldn't help but glance at the devastated classroom. He knew a few charms like *Reparo*, but this would take...

"Just give me a moment, Harry," Remus said in a shaky voice. His eyes were slitted as if the light hurt them.

Harry paused as Remus slowly tested his balance. Dobby hadn't ended up at The Burrow, so he assumed the house-elf had found employment elsewhere. He just hoped he was correct in his assumption.

"Dobby?" he whispered urgently.

With a quiet pop, the former Malfoy servant appeared before them.

"Harry Potter, sir, calls Dobby?" the elf asked hopefully; joy alight in his bulging eyes.

"Er, yeah," Harry said quickly. "I guess you found a job here at Hogwarts?" he asked.

Dobby nodded quickly, making his long ears flop. "Headmaster says Dobby may not be welcome where Harry Potter stays, but Headmaster offers Dobby a *job*. Headmaster pays Dobby three Sickles a month, but Dobby is free to quit if he wants."

Harry frowned for a moment, wondering why the Headmaster had said such a thing, then he realized that Molly might not have been comfortable being displaced in her duties at The Burrow. Not to mention having Dobby do some of the chores might leave Fred and George more time for mischief... Harry shook his head – there was no time for this now.

"Glad to hear that, Dobby," he said quickly. "Look, we've had a bit of an accident here. I'm going to take Professor Lupin to the hospital wing to get his head looked at. Would you mind, er, helping with the mess in here?"

Dobby looked at the wrecked classroom, from the shattered desks to the scorched flagstones at the other end, and his eyes grew even

wider. "Harry Potter, sir, is indeed a great and powerful wizard," he whispered, and Harry felt his stomach twist, but he supposed Dobby had cleaned up spell damage at Malfoy Manor more than once. The house-elf turned back to Harry and squared his shoulders with comical determination. "Dobby will fix it."

"Good thinking, Harry," Remus murmured. "I'd hate to explain any more of this than I have to," he said in an embarrassed tone. "Not one of my finer moments as a teacher..."

Harry felt a bit warmed inside that his tutor didn't seem to be blaming him for what happened, but he was still worried that the man was hurt worse than he seemed to be. There would be time to worry about what he'd seen and how to explain it later.

But Professor Lupin's luck seemed to be no better than Harry's lately. They'd barely made the first cross-corridor before encountering the Headmaster and several professors.

"Mr. Potter?" McGonagall asked, her voice rising slightly in alarm.

"We, uh, had an accident," Harry said quickly. "Professor Lupin hit his head."

Madam Pomfrey immediately stepped forward, her wand out. After making a few passes over the man's head, she nodded. "He's got a mild concussion, but if he can walk on his own, it's safe to move him to the hospital wing. I can deal with this better there."

"Perhaps we should all go there," Professor Dumbledore suggested in a mild voice. Harry could only nod wordlessly.

OoOoO

Madam Pomfrey had Professor Lupin resting comfortably on one of the infirmary beds. After a couple of quick diagnostic charms, she handed him two potions in a manner that brooked no nonsense. Lupin drank them both without a word, and Harry was reminded that she'd been the Matron when Lupin was a student at Hogwarts. Obeying her was no doubt still a habit!

Once the man had drained the last vial, grimacing at an evidently unpleasant aftertaste, his eyes had cleared and he once again seemed fully aware.

“Remus,” Dumbledore said gently, “how did you come to be injured?”

Harry felt his face flush with shame. However inadvertent, Moony’s injuries had still been caused by his magic.

Remus glanced at Harry and shook his head. “Mostly my own fault. You see, Harry missed the class where I covered Boggarts. I wasn’t sure having him confront one during the regular class was a good idea, but I did want to make sure he was familiar with the effects of their glamour, and knew the counter-charm.”

“Are you always in the habit of holding private revision sessions for students that miss your regular class?” Professor McGonagall asked in an arch tone that made Harry wince. He knew that she still harboured some reservations regarding Remus and his extracurricular summer work with Harry and the others. She was scrupulously fair, showing no favour in the classroom toward her own house, so any signs of favouritism by others would be met with clear disapproval.

Harry knew the strict professor had been Remus’ Head of House when he’d attended Hogwarts – deferring to her would be even more ingrained than with Madam Pomfrey.

So he was mildly surprised when Professor Lupin locked gazes with the Deputy Headmistress and said quietly. “There are reasons that I need to ensure Harry excels in my subject, but I am not at liberty to speak of them.” The other teachers looked curious about the vague pronouncement, but McGonagall immediately let the issue drop.

“I see,” said Dumbledore. “But if Harry was confronting a Boggart, how did you come to be hit by his spell?”

“I wasn’t,” Lupin admitted with a wan smile. “I was caught in the backlash when Harry destroyed it.”

Harry stared down at his feet as he felt his cheeks burn. He was startled when he felt Lupin's hand close around his shoulder. "I saw a young woman with red hair. Was it Lily?" he asked, but continued after Harry didn't answer. "It affected Harry greatly, but as I moved to dispel it, I think I was caught in a burst of accidental magic. I am quite sure that Harry's wand did not move, so this was not intentional."

Harry still couldn't make himself look up. After the dream he'd had about Dumbledore at The Burrow, the idea of losing control of his magic horrified him almost as much as thinking about the future.

"Was that what caused the explosion we heard?" Professor Dumbledore asked in a quiet voice. For an instant, Harry wanted to tell him everything, lay all the cards on the table, and let someone else be responsible for this whole mess. But would that just be taking the easy way out?

"No, Headmaster," Remus said, and Harry thought his voice sounded very odd. "I looked up just in time to realize that the Boggart had made a fatal error."

Now Harry did look up. Remus had a tight grin on his face that seemed to melt years off of his appearance, and Harry remembered that he was a Marauder, after all. "I know none of the approved modern magical history books carry an accurate depiction of what Voldemort really looked like, but given Harry's curiosity and resources, I don't doubt that he's read one that did. The Boggart decided to take on that appearance, and it was the last mistake it ever made."

"Harry Banished it?" Professor McGonagall asked curiously.

"Harry *obliterated* it," Professor Lupin corrected. "I daresay my desk will never be the same."

Harry resisted the urge to remind them that he was standing right there. He also realized that Lupin's concussion prevented him from fully realizing what had happened. There was no desk anymore. He hoped Dobby was able to do something...

“Harry,” Dumbledore said in a serious voice that seized Harry’s attention, “I understand that you may have been startled, but with great power comes great responsibility.”

Harry frowned. Where had he heard that before?

“It seems,” Dumbledore continued, “that your magic may be stronger than many of your peers. That means you need to be careful or you risk inadvertently harming one of your friends.”

Harry swallowed thickly. Dumbledore was layering on the guilt, and he knew it, but it still worked. Harry nodded. “I didn’t intend for that to happen,” he said truthfully.

“I’m aware of that, Harry,” Dumbledore said, “but you need to be careful to make sure it doesn’t happen again.”

Harry just nodded. He didn’t want to prolong the discussion. He was both worn out and wary of letting something slip. Had Remus seen more than he said?

OoOoO

By the time Harry was allowed to return to Gryffindor Tower, dinner was long over, but his appetite was nowhere to be found. His only consolation was that Professor Lupin didn’t seem to be seriously injured by his lack of control. He claimed his headache was gone, and only stayed overnight in the hospital wing at Madam Pomfrey’s firm insistence.

He noticed several people look up as he stepped past the Fat Lady’s portrait. His friends were clustered around a couple of sofas in the corner of the common room, so he made his way there with some relief.

Ginny frowned when she got a good look at his expression, but Hermione spoke up first. “Harry, what’s wrong?”

When he didn’t immediately answer, the others began to look more and more concerned, so he held up his hands in a placating gesture and glanced around the common area. Seamus and Dean were on



the other side of the room, playing Exploding Snap with some second-year boys. "Let's discuss this upstairs," he said quietly.

With that, they packed up their school books and made their way up to the third-year boys' room. Harry brought up the rear, quietly palming his wand. He didn't place locking or privacy charms on the door as it shut – that would have lead to all sorts of inappropriate speculation among their classmates – but he did perform a silent Warning Charm that would alert him if anyone approached the door.

The girls looked around curiously. While they were not barred from the boys' dormitories – though the opposite was certainly true – they hadn't been up there very often.

Harry sat on his bed, hung his head, and ran his hands through his hair. He barely registered Ginny sitting next to him before she laid a cool hand on the back of his neck. He tensed for a moment before he made himself relax. With her silent encouragement, he told them everything that had happened that disastrous afternoon.

When he concluded with how he'd finally been allowed to leave the hospital wing, he waited for them to react. A scolding from Hermione or Ginny he'd expect. An odd comment from Luna was only par for the course. An amused snort from Neville was enough to make him look up in surprise.

"You sure showed that Boggart, mate," Ron said, his smirk disturbingly reminiscent of the twins.

"Don't you get it?" Harry demanded. "I could have given everything away!"

"It actually may not be that bad," Hermione said thoughtfully. "Professor Lupin appears to have only seen the first body, and thought it might have been your mother, instead of an older Ginny."

Harry stole a sideways glance at Ginny. Her face was a little red, but she said nothing. Her hand stayed on the back of his neck. He supposed she knew how his older counterpart had felt about losing that other Ginny, but he was still uncomfortable when events reminded her of it.

“And then he saw Harry blowing up Voldemort,” Luna added dreamily. Then she smiled. “That was probably very reassuring,” she added brightly.

“No doubt,” Neville agreed.

“I can’t believe you are all making jokes about this,” Harry snapped, his voice a little harsher than he intended. Ginny huffed and her hand tightened on the back of his neck for a moment. He froze.

Her hand began kneading the tense muscles and he found himself relaxing in spite of himself. Her voice, on the other hand, was rather crisp. “Whether we make jokes about it doesn’t matter one bit. But I do think you are overreacting, and I’m not the only one, Harry.”

“Harry,” Hermione began in a placating tone, “my father is rather fond of saying that when you hear hoof beats outside, it could be zebras, but most likely it’s just horses. In most instances, the simplest explanation is the best. These clues may seem obvious to you because you already know the truth. But try to put yourself in their shoes for a moment. The research on temporal transit fields won’t be published for several years and there are explanations that are far easier to accept for what they have seen.”

Harry frowned at the bushy-haired witch. “What do you mean?” he asked.

“Professor Lupin saw you confronted with the dead body of a red-haired young woman,” Hermione began in her ‘explaining to my friends’ voice. “The only red-haired young *woman* he knows of with a connection to you is your mother. He assumed it was what he knew, rather than speculating about something else – like an older version of Ginny.”

Harry nodded slowly, her words reassuring him in spite of himself.

“And when you destroyed the image of Voldemort,” Hermione continued, “he apparently assumed it was because he’d killed your parents. Again, people tend to go with what they already know, rather than looking for something else. I don’t mean to make light of your concerns, Harry, but it may not be as dire as it seems.”

Harry nodded slowly and blew out a shaky breath. He couldn't fault Hermione's logic, and Ginny's mostly-silent persuasion was no less effective.

OoOoO

By the time the Headmaster and Deputy Headmistress returned to staff room, the concerns about the state of the greenhouses were the farthest from their minds. Madam Pomfrey, of course, stayed behind to keep an eye on her new patient. Professors Slughorn and Sprout exchanged a glance before suggesting they meet later on in the week.

The door had barely closed before Professor McGonagall turned to the Headmaster with a raised eyebrow.

"A most unusual disruption to what promised to be a fairly tedious meeting," he said.

"Is that all you can say?" she asked in deceptively mild tone.

"We should probably survey the damage to the Defence classroom before drawing any conclusions," he said thoughtfully, stroking his beard, "but I feel it is safe to say that young Harry may be a bit more powerful than we were led to believe."

McGonagall nodded. "He certainly did not display anything like what Professor Lupin implied during Duelling Association meetings."

"I find it troubling that he seems to be concealing his true capabilities," Professor Dumbledore said with a frown.

McGonagall gave him a sharp look. "Are you still looking for parallels that don't exist?" she asked in a tone that brooked no nonsense.

"What reason would he have for doing so?" Dumbledore asked, "He also seemed very upset that he'd been caught out."

The Deputy Headmistress shook her head in exasperation. "I think he was more upset by the injury to Professor Lupin. If you will recall, Remus and James were very good friends. I would not be surprised if Harry saw him as a link to his own father."

Dumbledore nodded. "A friendship that did credit to James, even if it did put him at odds with his father for some time. Do you think Harry is that attached to him?"

"Harry seems to be very focused on getting to know his parents' friends," she said carefully. "You saw the interview he gave regarding Mr. Black."

Dumbledore winced. "Minister Fudge is still quite agitated about Harry's accusations. He wants me to restrict owl post to Mr. Potter within the castle and not allow him to visit Hogsmeade with the other third years."

McGonagall scowled. "I hope you are not planning to accede to his requests," she said frostily. "No good will come of punishing the boy when he has done no wrong," she warned.

"I'm not sure the Minister would agree," Dumbledore said carefully, "but to Harry, he is just using all the means at his disposal to see his godfather cleared." He shook his head. "I did not agree to act on the Minister's behalf with regards to Harry, but Cornelius sees this as a base betrayal on my part. I fear that there is a great deal of tension between the Ministry and Hogwarts at the moment."

"Is that why you agreed to them posting Dementors around a school full of children?" McGonagall asked.

"They are not actually on the grounds," Dumbledore pointed out in a pained voice. "But yes, with these alleged sightings in Hogsmeade, I can't really interfere in an ongoing manhunt. I fear that Cornelius wants the man Kissed as soon as he is brought in, if only to head off a more thorough investigation."

"But he never even had a trial!" McGonagall objected.

"True," Dumbledore agreed. "But by fleeing custody he is placing himself beyond the protections afforded him by the law. There is a legal precedent for this, should the Minister order it."

McGonagall's gaze hardened. "Then I hope, for all of our sakes, that Sirius Black is not captured. Little else could so firmly persuade Harry

that the Ministry is his enemy... and he already has enough to deal with if You-Know-Who returns."

Dumbledore nodded wearily, for once showing his age.

As Professor McGonagall stood up, she paused for a moment. "I'll leave you with an additional thing to consider," she said primly. "Last term you were concerned with how callous Mr. Potter appeared regarding the injuries sustained by the Slytherin students who ambushed him and his friends. Compare that with how guilt-stricken he appeared tonight because of Professor Lupin's injuries."

Dumbledore looked up at her. "You are correct, there *is* quite a difference."

"I think it has to do with how much he perceives they deserve it," she observed. "Someone attacking him deserves what they get... but an innocent bystander?"

Dumbledore smiled as he stood up. "That is an excellent observation, Minerva! Please keep me posted on this, or anything else you observe with respect to Harry."

Seemingly in spite of herself, the Transfiguration professor smiled at the Headmaster's words.

OoOoO

The following morning, Remus Lupin smiled fondly at Madam Pomfrey as she fussed over him before allowing him to return to his quarters. She'd helped him recover from the increasingly painful transformations he'd undergone while he was a student at Hogwarts – he doubted she'd ever see him without being reminded of the boy who stumbled, shivering, from the tunnel to the Shrieking Shack every full moon.

Remembering all the aches she'd soothed, he could hardly object when she wanted to run an additional diagnostic charm, or feed him an extra potion or two. When she finally cleared him to leave the hospital wing, he smiled fondly at her and thanked her in a quiet voice. She flushed a bit; evidently the difference in their heights once he

stood up reminded her that he *wasn't* that same little boy anymore. Moony suppressed a grin as he left. Some things never changed, and others became even better.

Despite the disastrous finale to the evening, he was considerably cheered by what little he'd seen. Harry's confrontation with the Boggart had the boy displaying a degree of power that he'd only hinted at over the summer. He knew Harry was magically stronger than his friends, but he suspected 'The-Boy-Who-Lived' was holding back -- a lot -- during their exercises.

Remus frowned as he walked down the corridor, heading for a moving staircase. That label was probably a good piece of the reason why... Harry was already treated as an object of curiosity by so many; it only stood to reason that he'd want to conceal anything else that might make him appear different. Children his age usually wanted very badly to fit in with their peers...

Remus shook his head. He'd talk to Harry the first chance he received. Given the task Harry had to perform in the future, having overly strong magic was only good news. He just needed to make sure Harry saw it as a boon, and not another burden.

He smiled wistfully. James and Lily would have been so proud of their son.

Just being back at Hogwarts was enough to make him feel nostalgic, and thinking about what *should* have been was enough to occupy his thoughts until he opened the door to his classroom.

Surprisingly, the damage wasn't nearly as bad as he'd expected. The Boggart's crate was gone, of course, but his desk and the student desks had been put back in their normal places. He frowned. He could have sworn he'd heard the sound of splintering wood after he'd struck his head, but either he'd imagined it, or it was just the crate being destroyed. He'd barely got his eyes open again in time to see the imitation Dark Lord annihilated by Harry's spell. And after that, he'd been dazzled by the flashes shooting across his vision.

Slowly shaking his head, he entered the room. Hogwarts' house-elves were as efficient as ever. His desk appeared to be freshly

polished, as were the bookshelves holding extra copies of the defence textbooks, and someone had mended the small tear in the seat cushion of his chair... someone that was more proficient with fabric charms than he was, anyway.

Chuckling slightly, he looked at the clock on the wall. That, too, had been freshly cleaned. There was still an hour before the Great Hall opened for breakfast, so he could get some grading done on those essays.

But when he opened the left-hand drawer of his desk, he paused in confusion. Had he moved the essays? He checked the right-hand drawer and saw a set of quills and a fresh bottle of ink, but no papers. And how had that bottle been re-filled?

"Is everything alright, Master Loopy?" a high-pitched voice said from below his right elbow.

Lupin jumped with a muttered oath, almost falling out of his chair. He twisted around and stared at a cringing house-elf who was wringing his hands. "Who are you?" he asked, perhaps a bit sharper than he intended.

"I is being Dobby, and I works here at Hogwarts, Master Loopy, sir. Dobby cleaned up classroom last night. Is classroom to your liking, sir?"

Remus forced the scowl off of his face. He vaguely remembered hearing Harry talk to someone named Dobby when he was first recovering from his head hitting the doorframe. The overly-servile speech of most house-elves tended to rub him the wrong way, but he knew from his studies that they couldn't really help it. So, he found himself hastening to reassure the little manikin. "Oh no, everything is fine, the room looks wonderful," he said, causing the elf to beam with happiness. "I was just," he added diffidently, "wondering if you knew where the essays that were in my desk went?"

Dobby's eyes went wide with horror. Before Remus could stop him, the house-elf began slamming his head against the corner of the desk, over and over. "Oh, Dobby is a bad elf! Dobby did not save papers when cleaning! Dobby is so sorry! Dobby should be

punished!" Every statement was punctuated with a meaty thump of tiny skull striking hardwood furniture.

Remus was momentarily speechless at the extreme reaction his innocent question had caused. He reached down to stop Dobby, but the elf was stronger than his size suggested and surprisingly persistent. "It's all right, Dobby, I didn't really need them. I was, er, just going to throw them out anyway... so you, ah, saved me the trouble."

It wasn't until these words sunk in that Dobby stopped thrashing and trying to punish himself. "Professor Loopy means it?" he asked, eyes wide.

"Er, yes," Lupin said, taken aback. "Who told you my name?"

"Dobby asks Mister Peeves," he said seriously. "Mister Peeves was very helpful to Dobby."

Lupin winced, but refrained from commenting. "Well, no harm done. I appreciate you cleaning up the mess from that Boggart!" he said in what he hoped sounded like a jaunty tone.

Dobby nodded so hard his ears wobbled. "Master Loopy must let Dobby know if his Professorness needs anything! Anything!" Then he disappeared with a small pop.

Professor Lupin blinked and then shook his head. He closed the desk drawers and got up from his chair, heading toward the door. He supposed the students wouldn't be *too* averse to him announcing they'd all received full marks for their essays.

OoOoO

Dobby smiled as he returned to the kitchens. Harry Potter had been very worried about the classroom when he called for Dobby. He remembered the dark Young Master calling for him in similar circumstances. His orders had always been *very* clear. Painfully clear. *Make this so it looked like nothing happened. Make it so no one even notices. If anyone does notice anything different, tell them it's your fault!*



The desks and chairs were easy – he had only to get spares from the Hogwarts storage areas and fix them up, an easy job for house-elf magic. The same applied to the book shelves and spare textbooks, though he'd had to duplicate more than a few of those to make up the deficit.

The student essays, though, were a different matter. They'd been destroyed so thoroughly that his magic couldn't restore them – so he did, in fact fail to save them. Taking the blame for that didn't bother him, though he was surprised that Master Loopy didn't let him punish himself more.

If he would do it for Young Master, who didn't treat him very well, he'd certainly do it for the most wonderful Harry Potter, who'd freed him.

Dobby was delighted to note that the preparations for breakfast were still underway, so he could get in on those as well. Working at Hogwarts was great fun for a house-elf, because there was always something to do.

OoOoO

Harry was almost too embarrassed to meet Professor Lupin's eye when he attended his next Defence Against the Dark Arts class. It got worse when Professor Lupin asked him to stay after class.

Once the last of the other students had filed out, Professor Lupin let out a sigh that almost sounded like he was amused. "That was not the textbook way to dispel a Boggart, but it was certainly successful. Full marks, Harry."

Harry visibly cringed, causing his professor to laugh. Eventually, he relaxed as he realized the man didn't completely blame him for what happened.

After his laughter trailed off, Lupin eyed Harry appraisingly. "You know you have every right to be angry with how some things have happened in your life. Don't dwell on it, don't let it consume you, but it's all right to use that anger when you need it."

Harry looked up, and locked eyes with his father's friend. Hard green eyes bored into faded brown ones. "It can't be good that I hate Voldemort this much, can it?"

Lupin shook his head. "I'm not Dumbledore, Harry; I don't think everyone can be saved. I believe there comes a time and when justice must be meted out. I don't think anyone knows exactly how many deaths he's caused, how many lives he's ruined. If any living person deserves your hatred, he does."

Harry nodded slowly; feeling like a weight had been lifted. He had no idea that Remus disagreed with the Headmaster on such a fundamental issue – especially since it was Dumbledore's philosophy that had even allowed Remus to attend Hogwarts in the first place. But then again, there was an issue of choice there as well. Remus hadn't chosen to be bitten by Fenrir Greyback. Tom Riddle chose to become Lord Voldemort. That was all the reason in the world.

As he digested this, Remus' next question caught him off guard. "How long have you been hiding your power?"

Harry shrugged uncomfortably. "Since first year," he admitted. "When I saw how much stronger my spells were coming out..."

Remus nodded. "And you didn't want to show off?"

Harry shrugged again. "A little; I also didn't want to advertise too much. There are a lot of unfriendly eyes around here."

Remus nodded, conceding the point. "Be that as it may, I think we should work on that a little. We need to gauge exactly how strong you are, and then help you deal with it. Do you ever have problems controlling your magic?"

Harry shook his head. "Not unless I am angry or really upset."

"Then it would be a good idea for you to make sure you are always in control of your emotions," Remus replied thoughtfully. "Do the Occlumency exercises help?" he asked.

"Some," Harry allowed. "If I remember to do them in time," he added ruefully.

Remus smiled thinly. "That's always the case," he agreed. "I would also add that talking about things that are bothering you can be a great help. You are both unusually mature and unusually self-contained for a wizard of your age, Harry. I don't say this to make you uncomfortable, but if you keep things bottled up too much, when you do let the cork out you may go further than you intended."

Harry peered at Professor Lupin. While some of the man's observations were uncomfortably perceptive, his advice had the sound of painful experience to it. "Did that ever happen to you?" he asked.

Remus looked startled for a moment. "Yes, in a way. But I had friends who kept me from going too far. Given the... circumstances... we find ourselves in, I understand if you are hesitant to tell me too much. But I hope you do confide in someone. Even speaking about your problems to another person can ease the burden."

Harry looked away and nodded. Remus had evidently intuited that there were some things Harry wasn't comfortable with the Headmaster knowing. But he was being so understanding that it shamed Harry, just a little. But the simple fact was that coming clean with his friends *had* been an enormous relief. Talking with Ginny later had been even more cathartic. "I understand," he said finally.

"Good man," Remus said. "In that, you seem to be more like Lily than James."

Harry looked up sharply at that.

"Your mum was a bit more sensible about things than James was. I dearly loved them both, but there were times when only Lily could talk sense to James," the professor explained with a fond smile. "Although academically you take after your mother, you still seem to have James' propensity for getting into trouble."

Harry rolled his eyes at that, but he couldn't prevent the pleased smile that crossed his face.

“All I would ask of you, Harry,” Remus continued, “is that you exercise that Evans common sense and ask for help when you need it. For my part, I think it would be productive if we did some exercises to see just how much more powerful you can make your spells...”

Harry listened as Remus explained... all the awkwardness between them forgotten.

OoOoO

The remainder of September passed far more quietly, for which Harry was grateful. His electives, Ancient Runes and Arithmancy, proved to be very engrossing. Neither Professor Vector nor Professor Addams were slouches in the classroom, and both witches were very focused on their subjects. As a result, Harry found himself being challenged more than in any of the other classes. Ron and Neville were equally swamped trying to keep up with the material.

Hermione, on the other hand, seemed to be enjoying every minute of it.

She was so enthused about what they were learning in their electives that she wanted to talk about it all of the time... and Harry realized how disappointed that *other* Hermione must have been when both of her best friends stuck with Divination. Unfortunately, her enthusiasm was driving Ron spare.

One day, Harry found his friend in the common room, cradling his head in his hands over a half-finished essay on Norse runic alphabets. “I’m not sure I can take this anymore,” the redhead said in a low moan. “I keep getting my languages crossed up, and Hermione, she thinks this is simple! She keeps going on about this and I’ll show her a futhark...”

Harry coughed as he swallowed a laugh. “Ron, if you’re struggling, just ask her for help.”

Ron’s head snapped up like it was on a spring. “And then she’ll think I’m stupid!”

“No more than me, mate,” Harry said, and then paused, frowning. “You haven’t asked her a single question, have you?”

“No,” Ron said as he rubbed at his eyes.

“Then she probably thinks you understand all this and find it as easy as she does,” Harry said in a low voice as he saw Hermione start to come down the stairs. “Did you think she was thick-headed when you were helping her get comfortable on a broom?”

Ron stared at him for a moment as Hermione sat down. Then he cleared his throat. “Uh, Hermione, could you take a look at this for a moment? I’m having a bad time keeping these Norse ones straight.”

Harry smothered a grin as Hermione enthusiastically went through Ron’s notes, correcting a couple of things and showing him some simple mnemonics she’d developed to help keep them straight in *her* head. After a moment, Harry pulled out a quill and copied them down as well.

OoOoO

With the difficulty of their electives, October and the start of the Quidditch season was a welcome distraction to Harry, Ron, and Neville. Their early morning training had kept them fit, and Oliver’s speech about bringing home the Cup “one last time” before he left Hogwarts forever got everyone fired up, even on the reserve squad.

The whole team was training three evenings a week and Harry got to see some of the changes he’d missed at the end of the last season. Ginny rejoined the Chasers with nary a word about her absences last term. Ron was receiving a lot of personal coaching from Oliver, who evidently wanted a sure hand in his position after he left.

But most surprising was Neville and his progress under Fred and George. Harry didn’t think those two could take anything seriously, but he’d severely underestimated the Weasley Quidditch spirit. During one of the first practices, they asked Harry to help them with ‘a game of keep-away’.

In retrospect, Harry should have known better than to agree without getting all the details. Their little practice game consisted of Fred and George parking on their brooms about twenty yards to each side of Harry, then Summoning a quartet of charmed Bludgers and slamming them at Harry as hard as they could manage.

Now normally, this might have been a good bit of sport, but Harry wasn't allowed to dodge – not even the slightest bit. Neville, armed with a spare Beater's bat, was supposed to guard Harry and 'keep all the Bludgers away'. Neville looked a bit green when he saw Fred release the Bludgers and shot Harry an anxious look. At that point, Harry didn't dare say a word, or Neville would think he didn't trust him.

So Harry sat, cringing, on his broom as Fred and George ran Neville ragged over the course of ten minutes. He'd lost count of the number of cracks of bat on Bludger he'd heard before he realized that Neville was really doing it.

Red-faced and sweating, squinting with concentration, Neville zoomed around Harry in a tight orbit. His right arm was nearly a constant blur of motion as he fended off the Bludgers. Harry stared, amazed, until Neville's arm began to slow and Oliver blew his whistle.

"Ere now, that's enough of that, you two!" he yelled from the goals. George pulled out his wand to Banish the Bludgers back to the case and Neville sagged in relief.

Oliver began to chew out the twins as they headed for the lockers, demanding to know why they'd endangered their Seeker for a practice exercise this early in the season.

"Well, Ollie," Fred said in a jovial tone, "we thought Neville here could use the motivation. He's never got past handling two at once, you know."

Harry swallowed and turned to look at Neville, who still had that sickly smile on his face.

Ginny spun toward her brothers, narrowing her eyes. "You two are unbelievable! If you injure Harry, I'll... I'll..."

"You'll what?" George asked, looking puzzled.

Ginny inhaled sharply. "I'll owl Mum," she replied softly.

George, Fred, *and* Ron all froze in their tracks. "You wouldn't," Fred gasped, horrified.

"Don't try me," Ginny snapped. Harry made a point of sitting next to Ginny as they studied later that evening, and her mood seemed to improve slightly.

OoOoO

At breakfast the following morning, most of the older students were talking about the first Hogsmeade weekend that had just been announced. Harry was looking forward to getting out for a while, but was acutely aware that, as second years, Ginny and Luna would not be allowed to go. Rather than beat around the bush, he simply asked Ginny if she had a list yet.

"List?" she asked, frowning in confusion.

"Yeah, anything you want from Hogsmeade?" he asked. "I thought I might pop down there for a bit and check out the shops, anything you need?" He was purposefully downplaying an event that most of his classmates were eagerly anticipating.

Of course, he didn't fool her for a minute, but Ginny grinned appreciatively nonetheless. "I'll think about it. I might need some quills."

Harry didn't even have time to look at Neville before his friend had haltingly asked the same question of Luna. The blond girl patted his arm fondly and said she'd let him know.

Their meal was interrupted when a tawny owl dropped a bright red envelope in front of Neville. The Howler immediately began smoking and Neville flinched back in spite of himself.

"You better get it over with, mate," Ron commiserated as he covered his ears.

With a grimace, Neville ripped open the envelope.

“Neville Longbottom!” the paper snapped as it emerged, “When I give you instructions, I expect them to be followed!” it continued in an overly loud version of Augusta Longbottom’s voice. “When Mrs. Stebbins told me you were still hanging around with-“

At this point, Harry had heard more than enough. He stabbed his wand at the enchanted missive and spat, “*Finite Incantatem!*” He knew that normal Howlers were enchanted to react badly if the recipient tried to hex them... so he pushed more power into the spell and tried to visualize cancelling all the enchantments on the paper at once.

The Howler cut off in mid-tirade and poofed into a small pile of dust. The nearest candle dimmed for a moment as well, but Harry tried to ignore that as he looked up.

Luna’s face had gone very still. She clearly didn’t need anyone to tell her that she was the point of that message. After a moment, she rose to her feet and left the Great Hall.

Neville’s face, on the other hand, was quite different. It had started off pale, and filled with chagrin, embarrassed at being called onto the carpet in front of the entire school. But his eyes followed Luna as she walked away and suddenly it was like a switch was thrown. His face flushed and he spun toward the Hufflepuff table, glaring.

Harry saw an older boy snickering with his friends as Ron grabbed Neville’s sleeve, preventing him from standing up. “Neville!” Hermione hissed as she tried to help Ron restrain their friend, “The professors are all staring at us.”

“I don’t care,” Neville snapped. “Ken Stebbins has been talking to that gossip-mongering mum of his, and now Luna hates me!”

Harry leaned forward, lowering his voice. “Don’t be a prat. She doesn’t hate you, and revenge is a dish best served cold.”

Neville frowned uncertainly as he stopped struggling. Harry gave him what he hoped was an evil grin. Neville and Ron both suddenly



leaned back, so he wasn't sure if he'd succeeded or not... Ginny's elbow got his attention and he leaned back himself as Professor McGonagall arrived.

"What seems to be the problem here?" she asked in a sharp voice, no doubt irritated at having her meal interrupted.

"Nothing, Professor," Harry answered quickly.

McGonagall merely raised an eyebrow and turned toward Hermione.

"Ah, we were just, ah, surprised by the Howler," Hermione explained.

"Ah yes, the Howler," she said. "While it wasn't allowed to finish," she observed, glancing down at Harry, "I do believe I recognized Augusta Longbottom's voice. Mr. Longbottom, would you care to explain what you have done to cause your grandmother this degree of distress?"

Neville looked up, his eyes still angry, and Harry gripped the edge of the table. "I believe I offended her bigoted, pure-blood sensibilities, professor," he replied evenly.

"I see," Professor McGonagall said, her eyes boring into Neville, who was either oblivious or too angry to care. Either option scared Harry just a little bit. Completely unnatural, that's what it was.

"I think everything is all right now, Professor," Harry said, hoping to distract her before Neville said anything else.

"Is that so, Mr. Potter?" she asked, turning toward Harry.

Harry tried to give her his most innocent smile as he assured her that everything was under control... really, he did. His smile was absolutely nothing like the evil grin he'd given Neville earlier.

So why did Professor McGonagall suddenly go pale and step back like she'd seen a ghost?

OoOoO

After the evening meal, Harry, Ron, and Neville took a detour on their way back to the Gryffindor common room. Luna had stayed in her dormitory the entire day, claiming she wasn't feeling well, and Neville moped around with a face like a dropped pie.

Harry didn't know if a little creative revenge on this Stebbins bloke would make Neville feel better, but he was willing to give it a shot. He knew Ginny and Hermione were working on Luna, and he was confident that they would succeed. He knew from personal experience how good Ginny was at cheering someone up.

As soon as they were out of sight, Harry walked them through an incantation he'd picked up from a British Auror, though the man claimed the idea for the spell originally came from a bloke from Wisconsin, of all places.

"*Arachnos podares*," he whispered, tapping each of his feet with his wand. Ron and Neville copied him, though Ron looked a little uncomfortable. Harry lifted his leg and set his foot against the wall of the alcove they stood in. Taking a deep breath, he pulled his other foot up and soon was walking right up the wall.

The other two followed, and soon they were all walking across the wall and up to the ceiling. Harry was reminded, to his annoyance, that school robes were not exactly made to be worn when standing upside down. It took several sticking charms applied to the hem of his robes to get them attached to his trousers and not hang down in front of his face. Getting Neville and Ron similarly kitted out consumed precious minutes.

Finally, they made it to the corridor outside the Hufflepuff common room, with five minutes to spare before curfew. According to Fred and George, Kenneth Stebbins had a girl in Ravenclaw that he spent an inordinate amount of time studying with. Or rather, studying. According to gossip amongst the upper forms, he hadn't talked her into inspecting any broom cupboards as of yet, but he tended to make it back to his own common room only at the last minute each night.

The corridor with the entrance to the 'Puffs common room was well lit, but the corridor that it connected onto had a higher ceiling with arches

that seemed to collect the shadows. It was in one of these that the three Gryffindors lurked, waiting for their target.

Sure enough, with a minute to spare, the blond-haired sixth-year student came racing around the corner. Fortunately, they'd already worked out their plans ahead of time.

Neville led off with a low-powered jinx that made the floor momentarily slippery under the Hufflepuff's feet. Stebbins went arse over teakettle as he turned the corner, knocking the wind out of himself which preventing him from noticing the other two spells. Ron's spell was a Flatulence Curse he'd picked up from Fred that would make Stebbins *extremely* unpopular with his dorm-mates tonight. Harry's was a variation on the Babel Curse that Hermione had suggested after she realized she wasn't going to talk them out of pranking the older student. At random times throughout the next twenty-four hours, Kenneth Stebbins would speak words that sounded perfectly normal to himself, but would sound like complete gibberish to anyone else.

Stebbins picked himself up with a groan, muttering something that made no sense whatsoever. He paused while standing up, only to pass gas that was shockingly loud in the silent corridor. Then he collected himself and made his way to his common room before he was caught out of bounds.

Harry and his friends carefully picked their way across the corridor ceilings, getting far away from the Hufflepuff corridor before descending to the floor again.

It wasn't long after curfew, and the prefects were probably still getting ready to do their rounds, but Harry didn't want to take any chances on running into Filch. He pulled his father's Invisibility Cloak out of his robes and spread it over the three of them. They were growing large enough now that with three of them under it, the hem of the Cloak didn't meet the ground evenly anymore. Harry bit his lip as he realized this and silently blessed the shadowy corridor they traversed back to the Gryffindor tower.

They did have one close call, when Cedric Diggory passed them on one of the moving stairs. All three of the Gryffindors simultaneously

crouched as they edged together toward the railing. The hem of the Cloak touched the marble just as the stairway's motion rotated them through a brighter area under a floating chandelier. Harry lost track of how long he'd held his breath, but dark spots were swarming in front of his eyes by the time Cedric rounded the corner.

Melissa Bulstrode was just leaving the corridor in front of the Fat Lady's portrait when they arrived. Fortunately, she was heading toward the opposite end of the corridor, so they were spared another close call.

The Fat Lady was already settling down for the night, sipping what appeared to be a rather large glass of port. So when Harry whispered the password, she opened up without even looking up. Harry whipped off the Cloak as they passed through the opening, quickly stuffing it under his robes again.

Ginny immediately jumped up from one of the chairs near the door. "Move quickly," she said in a low voice, "Percy is out looking for you. The twins ran interference for a while, but I think he saw through them."

Harry, Ron, and Neville immediately made for their dormitory, ignoring the knowing smiles from the older members of the Quidditch team. Harry figured they were used to watching Percy chase Fred and George. Ginny followed them up the stairs as well.

Harry threw open the door, startling a small yelp from Hermione as she and Luna jumped up from sitting on Harry's bed. Dean and Seamus, who were sitting on the floor playing Gobstones, both began to snicker.

"Did you find him? Were you caught? Did those charms work? What took you so long?" Hermione asked without pausing for breath.

Ginny, who was bringing up the rear, managed to get the door shut before she began giggling. Ron bit his lip, while Neville cocked his head, trying to meet Luna's eyes.

Harry sighed. "Yes. No. Yes. We were being careful not to get caught. Were there any other questions?" he asked sardonically.

Hermione huffed in exasperation, but everyone's attention was diverted when Luna looked up and spoke. "Neville, I'm sorry I embarrassed you today."

Neville blinked and took a second to digest this. "Luna, you didn't embarrass me at all. My Gran embarrassed both of us. I want to formally apologize to you on behalf of my family," he continued in a formal tone. "Her remarks and actions this past summer have been wholly inappropriate and constitute conduct unbefitting a Longbottom."

Harry wasn't sure what that meant, but Neville's words had the sound of some sort of legal formula. From the way Ron's eyes were bulging, it seemed to be pretty serious, too.

Neville turned to Hermione and asked a question that captured everyone's attention. "Do you know the incantation to create a Howler?" he asked.

OoOoO

Marguerite Stebbins looked around in shock, her ears ringing quite loudly.

One moment they'd been holding a meeting of the East Lancashire Horticultural Society, the next moment a white snowy owl flew in the window and dropped a smoking red envelope in Augusta Longbottom's tea!

Scowling, the old woman ripped open the envelope before it could explode, ignoring the droppings the ill-mannered bird deposited on the antimacassar.

While they were not exactly friends, Marguerite had known Augusta for years. They'd formed an alliance of sorts against members of the society that wanted to 'modernize' their standards – standards that had proved more than sufficient for generations of their ancestors. In any event, she couldn't conceive of *anyone* who had the audacity to send Madam Longbottom a Howler – it was inconceivable!

So if she was reeling before the Howler began, she was in shock when she heard the voice of Augusta's grandson, Neville, taking her to task!

"Gran, I've always had a lot of respect for you, and what you're willing to do for the family, but this time you've gone too far," it began. The words were fairly mild, as far as Howlers go, but they were pronounced at an ear-splitting volume. Members of the society, flinched back, spilling their tea, upsetting chairs, and generally adding to the bedlam.

"Your actions yesterday hurt me, and, worse, they hurt my friends. And that, I will not allow. Now, we can continue exchanging Howlers, though I can guarantee that none you send me will ever be heard, or we can meet this weekend. Hogwarts is having a Hogsmeade weekend and I will meet you at the Three Broomsticks at noon if you wish to continue this ridiculous vendetta. Reply by a regular letter if that time is unsuitable," and with that, the Howler exploded into a fine spray of ash. The polite request at the end, added in something much closer to Neville's normal tone of voice, was almost too much for Marguerite's composure. Lips twitching slightly, she peered at Augusta, who appeared unruffled, except for two faint spots of colour that burned just below her cheekbones.

Marguerite decided she'd better owl Kenneth once she was home. It would be best if her son was careful that no one knew he'd told her of Neville's continued association with some of the lower sorts in his house. It just wouldn't do to be involved with this particular family squabble.

Author notes:

Here's the latest chapter. As always, a big thank you to my Betas: Runsamok, Kokopelli, and Siriusseeker!

On a side note: Some people have sent me objections regarding the presence of the American Expeditionary Force in the prologue. I'm sorry, but while I do live in the States, regarding their presence as some sort of jingoistic ethnocentrism displays an appalling ignorance of history. Or, to put it more poetically:

“The British PM was somewhat trapped, somewhat unpleasantly because of the surprise factor, but the substance of the trap was that Britain and America *always* supported each other. The “special relationship” was as alive and well today as it had been under the governments of Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill. It was one of the few constants in the diplomatic world for both countries, and it belied Kissinger’s dictum that great nations didn’t have friendships, but rather interests. Perhaps it was the exception proving the rule, but if so, exception it was.” –Tom Clancy, *The Bear and the Dragon*.

The only countries as likely to intervene as quickly would be other members of the Commonwealth. However, either due to philosophical issues or population density, none of those Muggle governments maintain as large a standing military. While the Canadian and Australian Magical Governments may have engaged in their own relief efforts, the American equivalent of the Ministry is the most likely to field a large contingent of Wizarding troops. That’s not to say there might be some Canadians, or Australians, or other troops somewhere in future-Britain, but the Americans were who Harry and Ron ran into. Besides, it let me pattern Hastings after some people I knew...

And on another note, why do people ask me pointed questions in an anonymous review? If you don’t sign in and don’t leave an email address, that’s pretty useless, isn’t it?

Finally, if you want to know the progress on the next chapter, or to see excerpts and previews of coming chapters, please visit my blog, the address for which is posted in my profile. That’s the first place I update, so checking there is a lot faster than sending me an email or private message.

## Chapter 34

The main room at the Three Broomsticks was nearly deserted when Neville walked in. He'd left Hogwarts with the first wave of eager third-years, but most of them were visiting shops like Zonko's or Honeydukes, depending on their tastes. Madam Rosmerta would be extremely busy soon, but not yet.

"Neville," the proprietor said with a warm smile that made the boy blush a little, "your room is the first one on the left after you go up the stairs. Your guest already arrived, so I left a tray there."

Neville nodded his thanks, though a grimace did seem to cross his face. It was only good tactics for his grandmother to arrive early to make it as if he was calling on her. It negated some of the advantages of meeting in a neutral location.

But the stocky boy's steps did not falter as he climbed the stairs and opened the door. That was probably wise, as any delay would likely only give him time to get nervous again. "Good morning, Gran," he said in a voice devoid of warmth, then turned and closed the door. Pulling out his wand, he cast a privacy charm that Hermione had drilled him on in the Gryffindor common room the previous evening. With that completed, he sat down at the table opposite his guardian, whose lips were drawn into a thin line.

"I don't see why you are so concerned about privacy at this point, Neville," she said sharply, "as you saw fit to message me during a full meeting of the Horticultural Society."

"Gran, your Howler went off in front of my entire school," Neville replied with some heat, then stopped, visibly gathering himself. "And you managed to embarrass more than one person as well. As you are my legal guardian, humiliating me is well within your rights, but that stops when you drag my friends into it."

Augusta Longbottom's eyes flashed angrily, but Neville didn't flinch. "Am I really, Neville? You seem willing to openly flaunt my authority at every opportunity. What happened to the boy, the last of my blood, that I sent to Hogwarts?"



“He grew up, Grandmother,” Neville said quietly. “He made friends, people that valued him because they like *him*... and not just as a link to Frank Longbottom.”

Augusta blinked at the mention of Neville’s father, her son.

“Do you have any idea how much I hated myself?” Neville asked her, looking up. “I was the last of the Longbottoms, but I seemed to be little better than a Squib. My own family was so ashamed of me, so frightened that I’d embarrass them by not being magical, that they were willing to kill me to make sure it didn’t happen.”

Augusta’s face paled. “What on earth are you-“

“Great-uncle Algie,” Neville said. “Your brother. He’s not quite all there, is he?” he asked slowly. “That should have been apparent when he pushed me off the Blackpool pier, trying to get me to show some magic. Gran, I almost drowned, yet you still had no trouble with him coming over to visit. He was hanging me out a third-story window by my ankles – and dropped me! If I hadn’t started bouncing I could have died, suffered brain damage, or been paralyzed for life. But you were all happy he’d done it, because I’d finally proven that I had some magic.”

Augusta looked vaguely ill. “I was crying out of relief,” she said angrily.

“Yes,” Neville agreed, “but it was relief that I wasn’t a Squib, not that I wasn’t hurt, wasn’t it? Better dead than an embarrassment, right? No smirch on the family honour, at least.”

Augusta’s eyes were flashing now. “You have no right-“

“You are the one who has no right,” Neville said, cutting her off. The shock on her face only underlined how rarely this had ever occurred. “It took making friends here, real friends, to realize what I’ve been missing. Do you know what Harry said to me, once, our first year? He said he was glad I was his friend and that it was good to have a Longbottom backing him up. That’s the first time I ever felt proud of my name, and it was because of someone *outside* my family.” Neville swallowed, looking down at his clasped hands. “If you try to make me

choose between my friends and my family, you won't like what happens."

Augusta Longbottom went perfectly still. "You should be very careful making threats, Neville," she said after a long moment.

"It's not a threat, Grandmother," he said in a formal tone. An astute observer would note how Augusta Longbottom blinked every time her grandson addressed her by the more formal title instead of 'Gran'. "With all the attention raised after Harry's removal from the Dursleys, I could submit Pensieve memories of all the times Uncle Algie and the others 'tested' me for magic. I like Trevor, but buying me a toad won't make up for all of that, especially as far as the Department of Magical Law Enforcement is concerned. I know the family name still carries a lot of weight within the Ministry, but the press would still have a field day. Is controlling my life worth that much to you?"

"That's not the point of this!" Augusta snapped. "That girl is completely unsuitable for you!"

"So now we come to the root of the problem," Neville said with a sigh. "You've never come out and just said what you have against Luna. Is her family not rich enough? Is her blood not pure enough?" The last question was asked with a slight sneer on Neville's face, one that looked scarily out of place.

"It's nothing like that at all," Augusta said quickly. "It's her... behaviour. It's completely disgraceful. Her whole family... and that so-called newspaper of theirs – it's a load of rubbish." Evidently the accusation of blood prejudice was somewhat unnerving, as Augusta Longbottom seemed off-balance at the moment. "And the first time I saw her, she was practically hanging off of you," she continued. "I will not see my heir consorting with such a... shameless..."

"Grandmother," Neville said with a glare, "Luna is a *nice* girl. She hasn't had a lot of friends, and she's been very lonely since her mother died. We have a lot in common. She doesn't always act like other people, but... sometimes I find it embarrassing, and sometimes I find it refreshing." He shook his head. "Do you know when she first decided she really liked me? In one breath, Bellatrix's spoiled brat of

a nephew insulted both Luna and my parents... so I beat him within an inch of his life in front of the entire school."

Augusta's eyes widened for a moment. "And where were your 'friends' when this was happening?" she asked in an arch tone.

"Keeping the other Slytherins from interfering," Neville explained with a Gallic shrug. "Luna later told me it was the first time someone had stood up for her like that, aside from her father. Such a simple thing, but... I'm not going to throw her away to make you happy. She pushes me to break out of my shell sometimes, and I need that. Even when she teases me, she's takes great pains to make sure it isn't hurtful. Not everyone goes to such lengths. At the same time, I think I'm like her anchor."

Augusta stared at him for a long time. "You've changed a lot, Neville."

"I know," he said. "Talking to my friends has helped me work out a lot of this. On my own, I'm almost as bad as Ron. On the other hand, Hermione's really brilliant at this sort of thing, and Harry isn't far behind. He's good at seeing why people do things, though he's been really puzzled by you."

"I'm not sure I understand your meaning, Neville," Augusta said crisply, visibly gathering her composure.

"Well, I mean your current actions," he said uneasily, "we only had my observations to work with, and most explanations didn't seem to fit."

"Explanations?" she asked, raising an eyebrow.

Neville shrugged again, and began counting off on his fingers. "Blackmail, family vendetta, a persistent Nargle infestation – that was Luna's favourite, by-the-way, obscure inheritance laws, a secret betrothal contract – that one really had me sweating, you replaced with a Polyjuiced impostor, the Imperius Curse, you being a secret supporter of Voldemort, Luna being your secret love-child with Luna's father–"

"Neville Tiberius Longbottom!" Augusta shrieked at the top of her lungs.

"It was just a theory," Neville protested mildly, the corner of his mouth twitching.

"You..." Augusta began, but her voice trailed off. "You're as bad as your father," she added with a sigh.

They both sat there quietly for several moments.

"Gran?" Neville asked. When she looked up, he continued. "You didn't approve of Mum at first, either, did you?"

She just shook her head, but her eyes were troubled.

"Don't worry," Neville said wearily. "We're both young and we know it. By the time we finish Hogwarts, we might both be entirely different people. So... we're just seeing what happens. We all have more important things to deal with, anyway."

Augusta shook her head. "I'm always going to worry about you, Neville," she said softly.

Neville pushed back his chair and stood up, frowning. He marched around the table and quite deliberately wrapped his arms around his grandmother's shoulders, looking somewhat surprised to find that they were no wider than his own. Neither of them seemed to notice as the door quietly opened and closed behind them.

Out in the hallway, Harry carefully removed his Invisibility Cloak and folded it up before slipping it into his bag. He whistled a jaunty tune as he walked down the stairs.

OoOoO

Following the *normal* schedule, the first Quidditch match of the season pitted Gryffindor against their arch-rivals, the Slytherins. The week after the first Hogsmeade weekend had Oliver in a frenzy as the match approached. Three straight Quidditch Cups would be quite the feat if they could manage it. Professional teams would be scouting Oliver for his coaching skills in addition to his Keeping. Harry vaguely remembered hearing about the *other* Oliver giving up his career to

train as an Auror when the fighting broke out again, so he wanted to help his friend as much as he could.

Of course, it was vaguely disturbing that he couldn't exactly recall *when* Oliver had given up his position with Puddlemere United. Perhaps it had only been mentioned to him in passing after the fact.

In any event, Harry didn't complain as the constant practices ate into his study time. After all, he'd done most of it before, except for Ancient Runes and Arithmancy. Of course those classes weren't all that easy, so he still had to push himself a bit to keep up. But he was saved from having to have a word with Oliver when Hermione Granger took the older boy to task, lecturing him on behalf of everyone in her study group.

It wasn't going that badly, right up until Oliver made an unfortunate comment regarding priorities. At that point, Hermione began speaking even faster as she began tearing strips out of the seventh-year's hide. Oliver was starting to resemble a trapped animal as the incensed girl slowly backed him into a corner. His mouth dropped open in abject horror when Hermione threatened to go to Professor McGonagall.

Oliver looked distinctly relieved when Harry and a red-faced Ron each took one of Hermione's elbows and steered her away from the traumatized Quidditch Captain. "I think you've made your point," Harry said in a coaxing tone. "Oliver has seen the light. Haven't you, Oliver? No more four-hour practices on weeknights, right?"

Oliver quickly nodded, edging toward the stairs to the boys' dormitories.

"I should think not!" Hermione exclaimed. "It's not fair to all of you, making you work so long. Not everyone can afford to lose that much revision time."

Harry gave Hermione's elbow a sharp pinch as Ron stiffened, looking annoyed.

"I mean, it's all well and good for Oliver to spend all his time on Quidditch," Hermione added quickly, "if it's what he plans to do after leaving school. But if he makes all his players do so, including the

reserve members, he could compromise their educations.” Harry had to give her points for a quick recovery as Ron’s facial muscles visibly relaxed.

Of course, Ron also needed to stop being such an oversensitive prat at times. He wasn’t as bad as that *other* Harry had remembered, but he still found it annoying when it cropped up. How long had Ron and Hermione been together before he outgrew that? Harry frowned as they led Hermione back to the table where Neville, Luna, and Ginny were already hard at work.

OoOoO

Oddly enough, Harry had almost forgotten about Professor Lupin’s medical condition until he walked into Defence and found Professor Dumbledore substituting. After assuring them that Professor Lupin was fine and would be returning soon, he had them all lined up ‘to do something fun’.

‘Something fun’ turned out to be shooting sparks at moving targets. It was actually a precursor of an Auror training exercise Harry had learned about and incorporated into their morning drills. Of course, they did it with real spells, which took a bit more out of you – but that was the point.

Harry was proud to note that everyone’s Occlumency barriers were hard and tight. He was tempted, now that they had the leisure, to learn the more passive, deceptive varieties. But with Snape and who knew what else running around with knowledge that they could all block, any enemy trying to access their memories wouldn’t be fooled for an instant.

No, his friends weren’t giving away any of their thoughts, but their skills on the other hand... it was clear from the beginning of the exercise that their wand work was noticeably better than their classmates. Harry tried to lie back a little, but he couldn’t find a means of cautioning his friends without the Headmaster picking up on it.

Of course, they soon realized that they were making a bit too good of a showing, but not until the other students had noticed it as well. Not

a single conjured bubble was making it past the students known as “Granger’s Study Group” or “The Gryffindor Six”, depending on who you asked.

Harry felt Dumbledore’s eyes on him as a wave of the Headmaster’s wand increased the volume of targets. At this point, any efforts at concealment would be wasted, if not bring on more suspicion, so Harry relaxed and concentrated on the targets, exploding three at once.

When the class was dismissed, Dumbledore gave them all full marks, but asked Harry to stay behind.

“A very impressive showing today, Harry,” the Headmaster observed.

Harry nodded, deciding to brazen it out. “It’s a lot like something we do for practice sometimes. I read about it in an Auror training manual.”

“You and your friends certainly seem to put a lot of effort into that,” the old man ventured.

Harry shrugged. “It helps in our classes sometimes, like today, and we know, generally, what’s coming, so we have to be prepared, right?”

Dumbledore frowned. “I’d rather not see you or them sacrifice your childhood for this.”

“I think childhood is overrated in some ways,” Harry replied coolly. “It only lasts a few years anyway. I’d like to think we’re getting ready for the future – hopefully, the other ninety percent of our lives.”

Dumbledore stared at Harry for a long moment before nodding. “Perhaps that is for the best,” he allowed dubiously. “But that is a very pragmatic attitude, especially for someone so young.”

Harry frowned thoughtfully as he shouldered his bag. “Maybe if my mum and dad had trained like this when they were my age...” He let his voice trail off. “They probably wouldn’t have beaten Voldemort, but maybe they could have escaped. Maybe they’d still be here.”

The Headmaster was silent as Harry left the room.

OoOoO

The weather on the day of their match with Slytherin was just as nasty and wet as Harry remembered. He glared out at the sheets of rain from the changing room, savouring his last dry moments for the next few hours. He gripped his forearms, surreptitiously making sure his wand was in place, as Oliver led them out onto the pitch. He glanced toward the stands, already having placed an *Impervius* charm on his glasses. In a rare moment of sanity, Oliver said there was no use in the reserve squad getting soaked to the bone, so his friends were all huddled together at the front of the Gryffindor section, under an odd collection of umbrellas. He didn't want to know where Luna had acquired the fluorescent pink and green parasol advertising some place called "Margaretville."

At Madam Hooch's whistle, they took to the air, though for a second Harry wasn't sure he'd be able. Finally, the mud surrendered his boots with an awful squelching sound and he lurched into the air. Harry could barely see his Slytherin counterpart, let alone the Snitch, but Oliver let him know that Theodore Nott had taken Draco's position, and cautioned him that Draco's former classmate had out-flown several older students to gain that position. Harry had no idea how well Nott could fly, so he was resolved not to underestimate the Slytherin Seeker.

Of course, flying around in the Scottish equivalent of a typhoon meant that anyone catching the Snitch would be more due to luck than anything else. That's why Harry hated flying in such foul weather – it took all the skill out of Seeking. Not to mention being soaked to the skin and feeling like his hands were frozen onto his broom...

Harry quickly lost track of the game, concentrating more on fighting for control of his broom and avoiding collisions. Madam Hooch had to blow her whistle three times before everyone heard it and descended to the pitch. Harry and his team-mates followed a wildly gesticulating Oliver to a huge umbrella erected at the edge of the pitch near the Gryffindor stands. "I called for time," the captain explained.



Ignoring the rain, the reserves jumped down and joined their teammates. Though the show of solidarity was nice, Harry thought they'd have been smarter to stay dry. He was even more surprised to see Hermione follow them, juggling a parcel and followed by a smaller figure in a voluminous cloak. When they got closer, Harry saw that they, along with the reserves, were carrying an assortment of charmed carafes and Muggle thermoses filled with piping hot tea.

Oliver stared at the younger witches for a moment, and then gulped down the warming drink. "This was bloody brilliant!" he said, colour returning to his face.

"Dobby helped keep them hot," Hermione said modestly.

The cloaked figure jumped, the hood falling back slightly to reveal the house-elf's pointed nose and bulging eyes. "D-Dobby is glad to be helping," the little manikin stammered.

"Well, we definitely appreciate it," Harry said, feeling a little warm for the first time since he'd entered the pitch. "What's the score?" he asked quickly as Dobby twitched again. He really didn't want him to make a scene right now. All the same, he was glad he'd introduced Hermione to his 'new' friend. She'd been very sympathetic when he told her Dobby used to work for the Malfoys, and her natural curiosity took it from there. Of course, Dobby was ecstatic about working at Hogwarts, and elaborated on how much nicer it was. With any luck, there would be no repeat of S.P.E.W....

"We're up by thirty," Oliver replied, jerking Harry back to the here and now, "but if we don't get the Snitch soon, we'll be here all night or until the storm clears off."

"Over my dead body," Harry spat. "It's freezing out here. Don't they ever call a game on account of weather?"

Oliver shrugged, shaking his head. "It's tradition," he said.

"It's bloody ridiculous," Hermione said, earning herself a nudge from Ron. "What if you get struck by lightning?"

“Hope the broom doesn’t explode between your legs?” Ron answered with a grin.

Hermione made an exasperated sound and stalked back to the stands, Dobby trailing behind her.

“You lot owe me one,” Ron said to Oliver. “She’s going to spend the rest of the match fussing at me now, instead of thinking of sharp things to say to you.”

“We are truly in your debt, little brother,” George agreed with a smile.

“You can always snog her to shut her up,” Fred quipped.

Ron paled, then turned and stomped away. Ginny, who’d been collecting empty tea containers from Katie, Alicia, and Angelina, gave Fred a glare. “That was rude,” she snapped.

Harry quietly gulped down the last of his tea, savouring the warmth, before handing it to a silent Neville. Harry noticed that Neville and Luna both made a point of detouring widely around the brewing Weasley confrontation.

“... could have stayed up in the stands, warm and dry, but instead he comes down to deliver some hot tea, and then you go and embarrass him,” Ginny concluded, her face starting to match her hair.

“She’s got a point there,” George said quietly.

Fred turned to his brother, looking shocked and betrayed.

“We’ll lay off Ron - with respect to Hermione,” George said to Ginny as Madam Hooch blew her whistle again, signalling the time out was over. He handed her his thermos along with an unresisting Fred’s. Ginny blinked, clearly shocked to see the twins break ranks, and made her way back to the stands.

“I can’t believe you did that,” Fred said in a horrified voice as they remounted their brooms.

“Well, it *is* getting a bit old, isn’t it?” George said in an even tone. “And if you did muck things up for them, we’d never hear the end of it – and *I’d* be caught up in whatever they did to *you* to get even. Besides, it’s more of a challenge to bait him in other ways, isn’t it?”

Harry suppressed a snicker as he stepped out into the freezing rain and took to the air again.

If anything, the rain was getting even worse now, and he could barely see one set of goals from the other. The gathering gloom also made colours fade, so it was harder and harder to tell team-mates from opponents. He was fairly certain that at least one of his Bludger near-misses was from the twins, and not Crabbe or Goyle.

Finally, there was a faint flicker of gold near the stands. Harry wasn’t sure if it was real or not, but this was the first trace of the Snitch he’d seen all day, so he wasn’t taking any chances. He hauled his Nimbus into a tight circle and shot toward the stands like an arrow. The roar of the crowd cut through the howling wind for the first time that day, indicating that they’d noticed his dive. Harry glanced back. A shadow that might have been Nott was chasing him, but it was too far back to have a chance now.

Suddenly the roar of the crowd, as well as the howling wind, fell silent. Harry hauled back on his broom, idling in little more than a hover, the Snitch forgotten as he scanned the pitch. A wedge of ragged, cloaked figures was pouring past the Gryffindor goals. Oliver lurched to the side, abandoning his hoops to get away from the scores of Dementors that had appeared on the pitch.

Harry couldn’t help but think the foul creatures were coming for him, personally. Below him, he could hear the shouts as the students panicked and began stampeding toward the exits from the stands. It was only a matter of time before someone went down in the crowd and was trampled...

He ripped the wand from his sleeve and concentrated on his memories of his *latest* trip to the Chamber of Secrets as he called out, “*Expecto Patronum*”, in a loud, ringing voice. He remembered how it felt when he realized that they accepted him, they weren’t mad, they were still his friends. Even Ginny...

The wand bucked in Harry's hands and his eyes were dazzled as a globe of pure white light erupted from the end of his wand. Trailing curved streamers of energy, the spinning sphere shot toward the ground in front of the advancing Dementors. When it struck the ground, there was another flash of white light. When it cleared, a massive white stag stood there, over twenty feet at the shoulder. It pawed at the ground with one massive hoof, lowered an enormous rack of antlers, and charged toward the mass of approaching Dementors.

From the corner of his eye, he saw a silver bird streak toward the Dementors from the staff section. The Dementors recoiled from the magical creations like waves breaking upon Gibraltar. The shouting from below had lessened in volume, even as the artificial silence seemed to disperse, but Harry couldn't spare much of his attention. His Patronus, a stag reminiscent of his father, was a good bit larger than he remembered, but he supposed that only made sense if his magic was stronger. The Dementors backed away from it, but it still managed to catch a couple with its sharp horns and send them flying.

At some unspoken signal, the Dementors turned as one and fled the pitch. Harry maintained his concentration on his Patronus, not trusting the foul creatures to know when they were beaten. He drifted forward and down, keeping an eye out for any stragglers trying to get around the glowing stag.

There was a loud crack and Harry's broomstick jerked hard underneath him as he felt several sharp jabs at the back of his neck. There was a brief sensation of falling and then darkness.

OoOoO

Melissa Bulstrode took her prefect duties rather seriously, unlike certain prats she could name. Her size and imposing demeanour made this a good bit easier than it could have been.

But even she was hard put to quell the minor riot that erupted around her when the Dementors appeared. She'd already had to grab one of the first-years that stumbled, right as she was about to get thoroughly trod into the wet floor of the stands. She didn't have time to do more

than hang the crying girl from a torch sconce by the back of her robes, but at least that would keep her out of the melee.

She didn't know what Potter had done to make those nasty bastards back off, but it had looked impressive as hell. Moreover, it made the hellish aura of the Dementors fade, which made her job *much* easier. She'd just about got the first- and second-years sorted out when a bolt of reddish light struck the back of Potter's broom. The twigs exploded in a ball of flaming splinters and Potter, along with his wrecked broom, fell at least twenty feet onto the pitch with a loud squelch of mud. He didn't move.

The stag faded from sight and the Dementors began to advance again, at least until that silvery bird cut in front of them. Even that temporary setback had set off the students again, but Melissa wasn't concerned with that at the moment.

The curse had come from *her* section of the stands.

She bulled her way through the crowd, angling for where she thought the caster had to have been located. But when she made it to the approximate area, all she saw were milling students, most of them third-years. None of them had a wand out. None of them looked suspicious as they all struggled toward the stairs down, trying not to slip in the collected water.

Reaching the top of the stairs, Melissa turned and looked back. Whoever attacked Potter wasn't likely to give themselves away now. They'd got away clean. She shouted for the students to form an orderly queue for the exit and stop bloody shoving. Spotting a tangle where it looked like someone had gone down, she began pushing toward it, finding that struggling against the flow of people was a bit harder.

She stumbled when she felt a sharp pain in her side. Reaching around, she found a rent in her sodden robes, warm with a trickle of blood. She struggled to keep her footing, wondering if she'd got caught on something, when her legs cramped up and she tumbled to the wet floor. Fire seemed to fill her stomach and lungs, making breathing difficult as heedless feet began to stumble over her. She barely noticed when someone stepped on her clawed hand, breaking

two fingers. The light dimmed as it grew increasingly harder to breathe.

OoOoO

Harry shifted uncomfortably as he regained awareness of his surroundings. The first thing he noticed was being warm and dry – conditions he wasn't sure he would ever feel again. The next was that his whole body ached in general and the back of his head and neck had something stuck to them. He opened his eyes, blinking at the well-lit hospital wing.

"Bloody hell," was what he tried to say. What came out was more of an incoherent mumble, not surprising given the manner in which his dry mouth and lips seemed to all be stuck together.

Cool fingers touched his temples and he blinked again as his glasses were settled on his face. He looked up to see Ginny raise her face. "He's awake, Madam Pomfrey," she said, looking over his shoulder.

"There we are, Mr. Potter," the school nurse said in her 'professional' voice. "I imagine you are a bit dehydrated," she continued as she leaned over him with a glass of ice water. Harry gratefully accepted the liquid, swallowing the lump in his throat until he could speak.

"What happened?" he asked, gingerly sitting up. He was sore, but everything seemed to be working and neither of his attendants objected to him shifting about.

"Some coward hexed your broom when you were driving off the Dementors," Ginny said with a scowl.

Harry blinked. He didn't think his Patronus would work if he was unconscious. "What happened after that?" he asked quickly.

"The Headmaster was able to deal with them," Madam Pomfrey said in a reassuring tone. "You struck the ground with some force, Mr. Potter, but fortunately, the mud was soft enough that you avoided more serious injuries."

"I see," Harry said, relieved. It made sense, given that Dumbledore had been able to handle them before, but keeping a large mass of them contained and moving with only one Patronus was a tricky business at best. "How is my broom?" he asked, hoping for good news.

The sad frown on Ginny's face as she shook her head was all the answer he needed.

"The dressings on the back of your neck and scalp are for where we had to extract a large number of splinters," Madam Pomfrey informed him. "But you should count yourself lucky that the spell struck your broom, and not your back."

Harry made a face. "I suppose I should. Do they have any idea who did it?"

Ginny shook her head. "Do you remember which section you were in front of when it happened?"

Harry frowned, concentrating as he tried to remember the seating layouts and how he was facing the Dementors. "Slytherins?" he finally asked.

Ginny gave him an angry nod. "No one saw anything," she spat.

There was a knock at the door to the wing and Madam Pomfrey gave Harry and Ginny a sharp look as she pulled the partitions around his bed. "I don't want to move you just yet, Mr. Potter, but I need both of you to be very quiet while I deal with this. Do not make a sound."

Harry gave Ginny a questioning glance, but the red-headed girl just bit her lip and nodded to Madam Pomfrey.

The nurse disappeared and there was a sound of a door opening. "Mr. Bulstrode, Headmaster."

"I've come for my daughter," rang a deep, rough voice.

"Yes, sir. Come this way. We are all saddened by her loss."

“Not likely,” the voice said bitterly. “Spare me your platitudes.”

“On the contrary, Mr. Bulstrode, Melissa was well-liked by her professors and had a surprising number of friends outside her house,” said a voice that could only belong to Albus Dumbledore.

Harry felt like he’d just been nailed in the stomach with a Bludger.

“And damn few within her house,” the man said with a sigh. “She was such a strong girl growing up. Didn’t take shite from anyone. Hard to imagine her dead, trampled by panicked classmates.”

Harry looked over at Ginny, who was slowly nodding confirmation.

“That’s not precisely true,” Madam Pomfrey said. “When I performed my examination, I found a small incision in her lower back. There were traces of a foreign substance that I sent off to St. Mungo’s to be identified. I expect the results back in a day or so.”

“I see.” There was a long pause. “That won’t be necessary,” the man said.

“But your daughter might have-” Madam Pomfrey began.

“She knew the risks,” the man said coldly. “I warned her more than once...” he continued in a quieter tone, “and... I have another daughter here.”

The hospital wing was dead silent for a moment. Harry realized Ginny was holding his hand when the pressure made his fingers begin to go numb.

“Gorry!” the man’s voice snapped, making Harry twitch. There was a muted *pop* that Harry recognized as the house-elf equivalent of apparition. “Take Melissa home,” the man said quietly.

“Yes, Master Bulstrode,” a quiet voice lisped, followed by a loud sniff. “Gorry is very sorry about Mistress Melissa. Gorry will take good care of-“



“Yes, Gorry,” the gruff voice interrupted, not unkindly. “I’ll be along shortly.”

There was a louder *pop* this time.

“You can use the Floo in my office, Mr. Bulstrode. There are a few things we need to discuss,” Dumbledore said.

“Very well,” the man’s voice replied, but it seemed less than interested.

After they heard the door shut, Madam Pomfrey moved the partition aside.

“What you may or may not have heard is not for public knowledge,” she said quietly. “I don’t imagine the Headmaster would appreciate me allowing you to overhear that conversation, but since this may very well be tied into the attack on you, I am bending the rules.”

Harry frowned thoughtfully. Melissa’s probable cause of death would normally be told to just her parents, barring a criminal investigation... and it didn’t seem like one of those would be happening any time soon. He looked up at the nurse. “Why?” he asked.

“Because I find two students being attacked minutes apart to be a very large coincidence, so her death is no doubt related to the attack on you. And I want you to keep your head *down* this year, Mr. Potter! I do not want a repetition of last year!” Madam Pomfrey said, her voice growing rather fierce at the end.

“I will!” Harry assured her as Ginny simultaneously said, “He will!”

They looked at each other as Madam Pomfrey rolled her eyes.

OoOoO

Of course, Arthur and Molly were already in the castle. Ginny said they’d visited the hospital wing earlier until Madam Pomfrey assured them that Harry was resting comfortably. At that point, they’d agreed to speak with Professor McGonagall in her quarters while the Headmaster contacted Melissa’s family. Ginny was allowed to stay

and keep an eye on Harry, as long as she promised to bring word to her parents when Harry regained consciousness again.

Harry lay back on the bed after she left. He was still a bit numb. As inured as his future counterpart had become to people dying, he himself was at a loss. From her father's reaction, Harry had little doubt what St. Mungo's would report. She'd been murdered, and he had a pretty good idea why.

Harry himself had kept quiet her involvement in the foiled attack at the end of last term. He knew his friends hadn't talked either. Melissa had, however, been involved in some rather serious public altercations with the other prefect before he was removed. Maybe Professor Sinistra or Professor Slughorn knew more about that.

But no matter the exact reason she was killed, Harry couldn't deny one simple fact. No one had died during that Dementor attack in the original timeline. That meant that Melissa's death was at least partially caused by the changes he had made. Just because he couldn't see an obvious connection didn't make it any less true. And that thought was making him increasingly uncomfortable as he waited for his guardians to arrive.

So Harry was well and truly in a state by the time he heard the doors to the hospital wing re-open. Madam Pomfrey led his guardians and Head of House back, only to find Harry already sitting up on his bed and searching the nightstand for his wand.

"Under the pillow, Harry," Ginny said quietly. He nodded to her as he pulled out his wand.

"Mr. Potter!" Madam Pomfrey objected. "You need to rest. You had a nasty fall and were unconscious a long time."

Harry struggled to master his frustrated rage. "I will. I'm also acting on the advice you gave me earlier, which I do appreciate." He turned to Professor McGonagall. "If the Headmaster is free, I think we need to speak to him about what happened today."

OoOoO

Melissa's father evidently hadn't stayed very long, because the gargoyle swung open for them without hesitation. Harry followed Mr. and Mrs. Weasley up the stairs. Professor McGonagall brought up the rear. Ginny had been sent back to Gryffindor Tower. She looked a bit rebellious at being dismissed until Molly reminded her that their friends might want to know that Harry was awake now.

The Headmaster wordlessly waved them to comfortable chairs that appeared in front of his desk. Harry was slightly surprised to see an exhausted-looking Professor Lupin already there. There'd been a full moon the previous night. Harry wondered if Dumbledore had already been quizzing the Defence Professor about the Patronus. The old man also didn't offer anyone a lemon sherbet this time, either.

"Harry," Dumbledore began, "I'm glad to see you looking better."

Harry nodded politely.

"Professor," Molly began, visibly gathering herself, "How were those... things... allowed onto school grounds? Especially during a sporting match?"

"That is a very good question," Albus agreed. "One that I have asked Minister Fudge several times thus far today. Unfortunately, the answers have been less than forthcoming."

Remus frowned and spoke up. "The handlers from the Department of Magical Law Enforcement are claiming that the Dementors were pursuing a suspicious character onto the grounds, one that seemed to match the fugitive they've been seeking."

"What happened to this suspicious character?" Professor McGonagall asked sceptically. "Did they find any traces of him?"

"Not as yet," Dumbledore replied, looking somewhat pensive.

"I doubt there ever was," Harry added, garnering a few glances as he finally spoke up. "Would they have all arrived in a mass like that if someone had simply slipped through their cordon?"

"That's somewhat doubtful," Remus agreed.

"You *must* do something about them!" Molly Weasley insisted, frowning. "It's simply not safe to have those things near a *school*."

Dumbledore sighed. "If it were only that simple," he said. "The Ministry insists on their being deployed to protect the public from Sirius Black. Surprisingly, the Board of Governors has backed me on forbidding them from entering school grounds, but I'm afraid my authority extends no further than that."

Arthur let out a sigh. "And if their handlers claim that they are in pursuit of a dangerous known fugitive, even that authority is voided," he said disgustedly.

Professor McGonagall looked incensed, but Dumbledore only nodded. "Worse, I believe the Ministry is going to be very interested in how young Harry here was able to produce such a strong Patronus."

Harry opened his mouth to speak, but Remus actually beat him to it. "Headmaster, I taught Harry and his friends that spell weeks ago. He has a... very strong reaction to the presence of Dementors. I discovered this on the Hogwarts Express at the beginning of the term."

Harry felt several sets of eyes turn toward him. The Weasleys looked especially concerned, with good reason, given what they knew of his memories. "I, er, hear my mum and dad... shouting and screaming on the night they were murdered," he said quietly, looking down.

He could have sworn he heard a choked noise come from McGonagall's direction. Of course, it wasn't too surprising – she'd known both his mother and his father as students. He looked up again, right into Dumbledore's eyes. "I've put quite a bit of practice into that spell," he said evenly. "We've worked on it almost every day so far this term."

"I see," Dumbledore said, leaning back in his chair, his eyes twinkling. "That's still quite an impressive achievement, Harry, mastering a NEWT-level defensive charm. Not to mention producing such a... substantial Patronus."

"Harry's achievements aside," Arthur spoke up, "it shouldn't be required for him to master such magics in order to attend school functions unmolested."

"Arthur's right," Molly added. "It's ridiculous the way he's been attacked! And what will that poor girl's parents say?"

"I've already spoken to Mr. Bulstrode," Dumbledore said in a weary tone. "He has... declined to pursue any sort of investigation." The old man let out a troubled sigh. Harry couldn't recall seeing him look quite so old since he'd come back in time. "He appears to be afraid of reprisals, especially if they might be aimed at his remaining child."

"Remember that source I had within Slytherin?" Harry asked, his voice low and bitter, "The one I was afraid would be harmed if it was known she'd warned me? It was Melissa Bulstrode who sent me that note." He looked up at the Headmaster. "Do you *still* think my concerns were groundless?"

"Mr. Potter!" McGonagall snapped as Molly simultaneously gasped, "Harry!"

Harry bit down on his next words. The old man's face had gone even paler, and a nasty corner of his soul actually enjoyed that. Maybe he'd take this a bit more seriously now. But for the most part, Harry felt ashamed of himself. If he'd discouraged Melissa, maybe she'd still be alive. Trying to shove his guilt off on Dumbledore was the act of a coward, even if events *had* proven him right to some extent.

"Sorry, Professor," Harry said, looking down. "I'm just frustrated by all of this. Ginny says you have no idea who attacked me or Melissa."

"No, Mr. Potter," McGonagall said in a clipped voice. Harry winced. He wasn't going to hear the last about his outburst for a long time. Her voice warmed a bit when she turned to the Weasleys. "We've checked every student's wand, and searched the Slytherin dormitories. No wands showed signs of a curse capable of destroying a broom, and there were no knives found with any traces of blood or other substances."

Harry's guardians didn't look very reassured. He felt the same way.

“So,” Harry said. His head of house gave him a frosty look, but he ignored it. Angry with him or not, he needed to do something about this, or staying at Hogwarts was going to become untenable. “We have at least one murderer inside the school, and a horde of monsters outside the school that seem to want to remove my soul. If we can’t address one thing, can we at least do something about the other?” he asked.

Dumbledore’s eyes bored into Harry’s. “You seem convinced that the Dementors were seeking you out,” he observed.

Harry glanced over at the Weasleys. Molly looked uncomfortable, but that might have been left over from his harsh words earlier. Arthur met his eyes and nodded. “I ran into a small pack of Dementors outside Ottery St. Catchpole this summer. They chased me all the way back to The Burrow. If the wards hadn’t stopped them...”

Dumbledore’s eyes widened behind his spectacles. Harry could count on one hand the number of times he’d seen the man surprised. This was one for the list. “How did I fail to hear about this...?” he asked.

“As far as we know,” Arthur explained, “they had to have been sent by someone at the Ministry. They’d stayed hidden and not attacked any of the villagers, so this wasn’t a wild colony. We’ve seen strangers in the village since Harry’s godfather escaped, so it seemed likely that they’d been placed there to intercept him if he tried to make contact with us. But we have no proof of this.”

Dumbledore shook his head. “Arthur, I’m sure Amelia Bones would at least open an investigation as to how a pack of Dementors ended up so far from Azkaban. At the very least, there would be a chance that someone might fail to cover their tracks.”

Arthur’s face reddened. “Well, as to that, we didn’t exactly have any proof to back up our allegations.”

“They tried to chase me through the wards,” Harry clarified, “that was the last mistake they ever made.”

“Do you mean to tell me that your household wards *destroyed* a group of Dementors?” McGonagall asked in a shocked voice.

Arthur nodded. "My eldest boy, Bill, works for Gringotts. He says the goblins have really come up with some impressive advances over the last decade."

Harry perked up suddenly, as though he'd been struck by an idea. "I'm sure if we ask, we can get the formula for the Dementor-repelling enchantments." He looked over at Dumbledore. "If you still have authority over the Hogwarts' wards, no one can complain if you upgrade them. Especially if it's to keep the students safer and prevent any more... accidents, like today?"

The old man didn't quite smile, but his eyes had a definite twinkle. "I wasn't aware that such advances were available," he said affably, "but if we can obtain the formulae, I believe the Hogwarts' staff will be more than up to the task of incorporating it into the existing wards."

Harry nodded slowly. "I think Hermione may have it in her notes, but I'd better owl Goldfarb. As it's directly related to protecting the trustee, he can probably transfer funds to cover licensing the ward design for Hogwarts."

"But if your friend already has the formulae, can't we just use that and get it over with sooner?" Mrs. Weasley asked, frowning. Harry realized she'd just had a very direct demonstration on how Hogwarts could, in fact, be less secure than The Burrow. That couldn't have been pleasant for her.

"We could," Harry agreed, "but I'd rather be fair to the goblins. Goldfarb has been very scrupulous in his dealings with me, and I'd hate for Bill to get into trouble if his employers thought he had a hand in this. I trust Goldfarb not to cheat me."

"Trust is a rare commodity in dealings between Wizards and goblins, Harry," Dumbledore warned, though he seemed to be smiling a bit under his beard.

"I don't see why," Harry replied with a slight chill to his voice. "He's never been less than fair with me. That puts him ahead of the Ministry and other parties in my book."

OoOoO

Things were starting to return to normal on Sunday, though many students wore black armbands bordered with white trim. Harry and his friends wore them as well, and more and more of Gryffindor followed suit throughout the day. A few students looked questioningly at Harry, seeming to wonder why he was mourning the death of a Slytherin, but none had the temerity to openly ask him why.

Hedwig returned around lunchtime bearing Goldfarb's reply. Harry began to read the letter as he ate, but his chewing grew slower and slower as he digested the contents. Finally, he put down his fork and pushed away from the table. Fortunately, Professor McGonagall was still eating at the head table, so he quickly made his way there.

"Mr. Potter?" she inquired after swallowing.

"I received a reply from Gringotts," he said quietly. "They are happy to provide what we asked for, *pro bono*, but they would like a small favour in return..."

OoOoO

Before the evening meal, Professor Dumbledore led the other professors in a quiet memorial service for Melissa Bulstrode. By this point, almost everyone in the Great Hall were wearing armbands, though some seemed less than sincere to Harry. He was, however, proud to note that Fred and George were unusually solemn, and hadn't given Percy a word of backtalk as he lectured the Gryffindors in the common room on proper decorum for this evening.

Harry stood, along with the other students, as the Headmaster said a few words. He surreptitiously surveyed the Slytherin table for any... unusual... behaviour, but he knew it was a useless effort. If the professors hadn't been able to winnow out the murderer, then he or she wasn't going to slip up now. It also meant that whoever did it also had some form of Occlumency training as well. Percy had let slip that Dumbledore had supervised the questioning of the students in that section of the stands.

At least there was one face there that Harry knew wasn't a false mask. Millicent Bulstrode stood with her hands clasped in front of her, tears streaming down her face. None of her housemates were



reacting to this. Was it Slytherin manners to not acknowledge a breakdown in a companion's demeanour? Or were they just a bunch of cold bastards? While anger was easier to deal with than guilt, now was not the time for it.

Harry mulled this over as Professor Slughorn finished the final eulogy and a much-subdued Great Hall sat down and began their evening meal.

OoOoO

The Astronomy tower wasn't used for classes on the weekend, and on Saturday evenings it was a fairly popular place for couples in the upper forms to get a little privacy 'to talk' uninterrupted. But in the wee hours of Sunday night, or rather Monday morning, most students sought their beds, especially since there were classes in just a few hours. This meant that Millicent had the parapet all to herself. She'd been there a while, staring out over the forbidden forest, before she spoke.

"Come to finish what you started?" she asked in a ragged voice. She sounded raw from weeping, but her tone of voice was almost... disinterested.

"Not at all," Harry said as he doffed his Invisibility Cloak. He wondered if she'd heard him breathing.

"Oh, it's you," she said flatly. "I suppose if anyone has a good alibi, it's you, Potter."

Harry shrugged. "I guess."

"So what do you want?" Millicent asked. "Come to gloat? Happy that they're going after someone *besides* you and your precious Gryffindors?"

"Do you know who did it?" he asked intently. Her father had been afraid of reprisals if the murder was investigated.

"If I did, I'd be doing something about it," she snarled. "And I wouldn't be calling for professors or Aurors like some cowardly-"

"Give me solid proof," Harry cut in coldly, "and the Aurors will never find the body."

Millicent blinked. "You almost sounded serious. You, the hero of the Light, the Boy Who Lived? That's a laugh."

"Look, Millicent," Harry said with some exasperation. "We aren't friends, and we may never be. But your sister was my friend. She was funny, she let me off the hook for something stupid I did, and she helped me and my friends avoid a nasty situation."

Millicent's eyes went wide. "End of last spring..." she gasped. "*She's* why Pansy and the others failed?"

Harry nodded. "She sent me a note warning me what they were planning. When I said once that I owed her... she asked that any debts be transferred to you." He paused. "She said that, like her, your friends were just using you. An older prefect overheard them and tipped her off. She said that, at some point, you may need help and she might not be available. I... I think she just meant because she's older and would have left school, but the same principle applies."

The stocky girl's lower lip trembled, but her eyes grew flinty. "You could just be saying this because you want to use me against my housemates – just like you used M-Melissa," she accused.

Harry nodded. "I could be. Do you want a magically-binding oath that I'm telling the truth?"

Millicent started to speak, but then stopped. She shook her head. "Keep your wand in your pocket, Potter. Just leave me alone."

"I'll go," Harry said. "But remember what I said. I liked your sister, and I owe the Bulstrodes a debt. If you ever need help, a favour, anything... just let me know."

Millicent looked up. "You really mean that, don't you?"

Harry shrugged again. "I- I couldn't help Melissa when she needed it. This is the best I can do."

Millicent sighed. "All right, I believe you. Just go, before someone sees us talking. And stay away – I have enough things to worry about now."

Harry gave a small nod that turned into a bow as he swung the Cloak back onto his shoulders. That hadn't gone quite as he'd expected, but his heart was a little lighter as he descended the tower. He'd made the offer and Millicent knew she could call on him if she got into trouble. Hopefully, she'd be on her guard.

Author Notes:

It's been a while; for some reason the conversation in Dumbledore's office wasn't cooperating. DH is out, but it's not going to be as hard to incorporate the new canon as I feared. The AU divergence point will be Voldemort's decision to make the Hat a Horcrux right under Dumbledore's nose. That means he had one more Horcrux when he went after the Potters, and his soul was even less stable.

In the first timeline, Voldemort discovered Snape's treachery, earning the spy a shallow, unmarked grave. The Dark Lord's even more tattered soul made him more violent and vicious, so he went for a more destructive conquest than was seen in *Deathly Hallows*.

In the first timeline, Harry was unaware of the Horcrux within himself, but during that final Legilimency barrage, the fragment was expelled through the link between himself and Voldemort. It briefly re-united with Voldemort's soul as he was experiencing a hint of regret as his mind was destroyed... just in time for the Blasting Curse that marked the beginning of the prologue.

In the new timeline, the arrival of Future-Harry's soul, replete with memories of Occlumency training and a burning hatred of Voldemort, annihilated the accidental Horcrux, even as the two souls began to merge. I'm here to write an action/adventure story, not a passion play.

If you want to debate other elements of the new canon, we've been doing that on the ViridianDreams yahoo group. (I'd rather do it there than in reviews and review replies.)

And as always, many thanks to my betas: the comely Runsamok, the somewhat scarce Kokopelli, and the always final Sherylyn.

## Chapter 35

### Hogwarts Under Siege!

-Reported by Rita Skeeter, Special Correspondent for *The Quibbler*

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, a bastion of higher education and a cornerstone of Wizarding culture, has long been a refuge for students as they struggle to master their magical gifts. Pureblood scion and wide-eyed Muggle-born alike spend long hours mastering the craft under the watchful eyes of Headmaster Albus Dumbledore and his hand-picked teaching staff. These children — *our children* — represent the future of the Wizarding World, and their safety must be held paramount in the minds of all responsible adults.

Except, of course, for those adults who work for the Ministry of Magic.

In a manoeuvre that has many shaking their heads, Minister Fudge has ordered *Dementors*, the grisly creatures that guard the Wizarding prison of Azkaban, to lay siege to Hogwarts. The Ministry *claims* that this is being done to protect the school from the menace that is Sirius Black. Of course, one might wonder about this, considering recent objections aired in the press (including those raised by your faithful correspondent) regarding certain *irregularities* in the original proceedings against Mr. Black, coupled with the observation that if one believes the Ministry's allegations, Mr. Black escaped from Azkaban when it was being guarded by Dementors.

The *stated* rationale given for this move is a string of dubious "Sirius Black sightings" that the Ministry claims they have received over the summer – placing him near the magical village of Hogsmeade. The possibility that the notorious fugitive is in the area would merit some action by the Ministry. However, to date no one in the press has been able to find any Hogsmeade residents who will verify that they saw Mr. Black, let alone alerted the Ministry. A curious state of affairs.

This year's students returned to their school, their refuge of higher learning, only to find the gates guarded by soul-sucking monsters out of their worst nightmares. Such a wonderful introduction to our world for eleven-year-old Muggle-borns who have just discovered their

magical heritage – being exposed to creatures whose very presence is used to punish society's most hardened criminals.

Of course, if the Ministry were to go to such extremes to guard the public safety, surely they would not allow the grisly creatures near our children unless they were firmly controlled. That is something that concerned citizens and members of the Hogwarts Board of Governors were assured of when Minister Fudge issued his commands.

Therefore, one might be shocked to discover that these horrible monsters in the service of our Ministry ran amuck this past weekend, entering the grounds of Hogwarts itself, and attacking the gathered students during a school Quidditch match! If not for the quick reactions of Harry Potter and Albus Dumbledore, who knows how many students might have had their very souls ripped away? How many others might have died in the panic as the crowd stampeded? How many of *our children* would have died to satisfy the Ministry's vindictive need to pursue a man that many credible authorities assert may be innocent of all wrong-doing?

As it is, one student still lost her life in the melee. We at *The Quibbler* would like to extend our deepest condolences to the family of Prefect Melissa Bulstrode.

And we would also pose this question to the responsible parties in the Ministry, who have hands wet with the blood of a sixteen-year-old witch: How many more must die to appease the vindictive anger of an unaccountable Ministry?

OoOoO

Fear and Rumour-mongering Alleged after Sighting of Sirius Black

-Adolphus Milthwhispe, Special Correspondent for the *Daily Prophet*

In a statement issued by the Ministry of Magic, Minister Fudge admits that he is "shocked and dismayed" regarding the wildly exaggerated events reported in the popular press. "While I don't expect much from such shoddy publications," he continued, "this borders on the libellous.

I'll be consulting with Ministry solicitors regarding possible legal action."

OoOoO

## Gringotts Makes Large Donation to Hogwarts Security

-Reported by Rita Skeeter, Special Correspondent for *The Quibbler*

Today, in a surprise announcement, the Board of Directors for Gringotts voted to donate the services of their elite Ward-Masters to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Aside from various construction materials, this grant also includes several proprietary ward formulae of inestimable value. These formulae, which to date have never been allowed outside direct control of the goblins and their bonded employees, will allow significant upgrades to the school's defences.

This action comes on the heels of an incident this past weekend, when a horde of Dementors, normally the gaolers of the Azkaban Wizarding Prison, escaped the control of their incompetent Ministry handlers and overran the school during a school Quidditch match. Although the foul creatures were quickly driven away by the Hogwarts staff, the ensuing panic resulted in several injuries and the death of a sixth-year prefect.

Gringotts Spokes-goblin Shraknak had this to say at an open press conference held earlier today at the Diagon Alley branch: "The management of Gringotts is highly concerned by recent events at Hogwarts School for Witchcraft and Wizardry. The young represent not only the potential of a people, but their hopes for the future. We find this blatant disregard for the safety of your young extremely troubling, and so we find ourselves taking steps to guarantee the safety of our future customers. These upgrades, offered *pro bono*, will prevent the Ministry's Dementors from encroaching on the school grounds in the event of another *accident*."

This conference was curiously unattended by other members of the press, even those working out of offices located only blocks away.

When asked to make a comment on the surprise announcement, Headmaster Albus Dumbledore had this to say: "The safety and wellbeing of all students is of great concern to every member of the Hogwarts staff. I was pleasantly surprised by this extremely generous gesture on the part of the Goblin Nation, and look forward to meeting with them to work out the details."

Reactions among the wizards and witches on Diagon Alley were varied.

"I haven't had many dealings with the goblins, outside of Gringotts, but I'm glad to hear someone is doing something. I remember helping Miss Bulstrode with her robes, right before the term started. She was very polite, even when none of the regular stock fit, and we had to measure her for a special order. It was terrible, hearing she'd been killed like that." – Miriam Malkin, Clothier.

"Smells pretty fishy to me. Them goblins are always looking out for themselves first. I trust them about as far as I can spit one." – Mundungus Fletcher, Salvage Consultant.

"I have six children attending Hogwarts this year, and I've been worried out of my mind since I heard they were putting those horrid Dementors around a *school*! I was here doing some banking when the announcement came, and I could have kissed my teller when I heard the news. If the goblins are going to protect our children when the Ministry won't, then good for them!" -- Molly Weasley, House Witch.

OoOoO

Harry blinked and set down his copy of *The Quibbler*. He suppressed a grin as Hermione snatched it up and began scanning the article. Her eyes were wide as she finished.

"Rita's in rare form, isn't she?" he asked in a low voice as he refocused on his breakfast.

Hermione nodded as the paper made the rounds among the other Gryffindors. "I'd hate to get on her bad side," she murmured as she speared a sausage.



Harry's grin widened. *Oh, the irony...*

"I hope Mum doesn't get Dad in trouble," Ginny said in a worried voice. "Do you think someone in the Ministry might make trouble for him over this?"

Ron looked thoughtful, but then shook his head. "I don't think so. Mum's got a bit of a reputation, you know. Do you remember when Dad said Charlie could go to Romania after he finished school?"

Ginny frowned. "A little. There was a lot of shouting, wasn't there?"

Ron nodded. "I don't think anyone is going to hold Dad responsible for what Mum says about something like this."

"I think my Gran is just as upset," Neville added quietly.

"You'd think with all this bad press, the Ministry would recall the Dementors," Hermione said with a frown. "Why are they being so stubborn?"

"I'm not sure," Harry replied. This was starting to bother him as well. "Maybe the Minister is afraid that if he pulls them out now, he'll be admitting he was wrong to send them here in the first place."

"He's probably getting some very bad advice," Luna added. "My father has done a lot of stories about some of the Minister's secret advisors. I don't doubt that some of them are probably behind this."

Harry was impressed by Neville's diplomatic nod.

OoOoO

Later that afternoon, Professor McGonagall asked Harry to stay after Transfiguration. He lingered, gathering up his parchment and quills, and promised his friends he'd meet up with them later.

After the last student filed out, Harry walked up to the desk occupied by his head of house. "Yes, Professor?"

“Gringotts has sent word that we may expect their envoys to arrive over the weekend,” she informed him. “I take it they are... satisfied with what has happened?” she asked, her manner rather cool.

Harry nodded, slightly puzzled at her reaction. He didn’t think she had any issues with the goblins, but then again he couldn’t recall it ever coming up either. “They should be. Goldfarb said that they just wanted public acknowledgement of their donation. That really isn’t too much to ask, but he hinted that in the past such efforts haven’t always been received very graciously.”

Professor McGonagall’s lips became even thinner as her eyebrows furrowed. “Be that as it may, this has put Hogwarts, not to mention the Headmaster, in a very delicate position. Minister Fudge has become highly incensed at this turn of events, and refuses to even speak to the Headmaster unless he rejects the goblins’ donation.”

Harry winced. “That would not be a good idea,” he said slowly. “That would be a major humiliation for them if he did that.”

“I find it very odd, Mr. Potter,” she said crisply, “that you are so solicitous with respect to the feelings of your goblin friends, while at the same time you seem almost unmindful of the consequences of your actions with respect to your own society.”

Harry straightened and clasped his hands behind his back. He knew the signs of an incipient chewing out. He let his features fall into a neutral mask.

McGonagall’s eyes narrowed, but she didn’t pause. Evidently, she’d been saving this up for a while. “Despite your past, Mr. Potter, you are, first and foremost, still a member of my house. Your words and your conduct reflect on myself and your housemates, as well as the rest of the school. I wanted to know what you were thinking when you gave that interview before the start of term, but I assumed the Headmaster would broach that subject with you in his own time. Since he has not seen fit to call you to task for your behaviour, it falls to me.”

“I was not aware that anything I said to Ms. Skeeter was untrue,” Harry said stiffly. It was difficult to keep the anger out of his voice. An

increasingly cranky side to his personality was growing ever more frustrated with people questioning his actions or his motives. It was irrational, of course. Most people saw him as an overly precocious thirteen-year-old wizard – of course they'd question some of the things he'd done.

But that didn't make it any easier.

"Mr. Potter," McGonagall snapped, "you are not a stupid young man, so I will appreciate it if you do not act as such in my presence. There is a world of difference between the content of one's words and how they are delivered. Your answers were clearly crafted so as to cause as much ill will as possible. I find it curious that you are so wary of offending the goblins, yet still wish to enrage the majority of our own government with your accusations."

"The goblins," Harry said with a little heat, "have gone out of their way to be honest and forthcoming with me. Goldfarb has helped me in several ways, and never hesitated to answer any questions that he could." It was difficult to avoid contrasting that with Dumbledore's reticence regarding the prophecy.

"Mr. Potter," McGonagall replied, "you are still a minor, under the care of your legal guardians. It is the height of foolishness to antagonize people with the power to intervene. I'm amazed that your guardians even allowed you to speak to that woman."

Harry was distantly reminded of her instructions to him regarding keeping his head down around Professor Umbridge. Of course, that had worked out just swimmingly. "Actually, I'd worked out the substance of most of my answers with my guardians ahead of time," he admitted. "The tone was partially me, and a good bit of Rita's professional skill."

That admission actually caught her off guard, something Harry didn't often see in either time line. "Why on earth would they...?" she asked, her words trailing off.

"I asked Mr. Weasley," Harry explained, "just who Fudge's closest advisors were. He may not hold a prominent position, but Arthur Weasley is no one's fool. He can read the signs and pays attention to

the cafeteria gossip as well. You and I both know that Lucius Malfoy paid a lot of money to avoid prosecution, and more of that money had Fudge hanging on his every word. If he hadn't been so over-confident about the hearing, I might have ended up as *his* fosterling instead."

"All the better reason not to antagonize him until you are older," McGonagall insisted. "Politics at this level is best left to adults."

"You are assuming I have the time to wait," Harry objected. Then he lowered his voice, glancing at the closed door to the classroom. "Remember what we heard that night in the hospital wing, about what I still have to deal with. Certain things can't be left undone forever. And if what almost happened two years ago does occur... you know certain people will flock to *his* side again."

McGonagall looked distressed. "You think this will happen... while you are still a student?"

At first, her expression puzzled him, but then he realized that she was far more concerned for him, than for the consequences to herself, and most of his irritation melted away. "I think it's a possibility," he conceded grimly. "Better to plan for the possibility than be caught off guard. I learned that playing chess with Ron. If Voldemort returns... he *owns* Lucius, and the Minister is in Lucius' pocket. He'll turn on us, turn on Dumbledore, in an instant; he's that venal."

"You sound like you've met him," McGonagall observed.

That brought Harry up short. "I don't have to," he explained. "His decisions speak for themselves. All those pardons he expedited, yet he refuses to even consider re-opening Sirius' case. Relations with other species are at very low ebb, mostly due to a combination of arrogance and apathy on the part of the Ministry. Things sliding a bit right after Voldemort's fall is one thing, but ten years later?" He shook his head. "He's little more than a chair-warmer, and a mouthpiece for whoever is filling his pockets."

"Then what is to be gained by antagonizing the man?" McGonagall demanded. She took a deep breath. "I don't dispute what you are saying," she added in a calmer voice, "but attacking the man serves no purpose at the moment."

Harry took a deep breath. "Professor, let's play a game of 'let's pretend.' Have you ever considered what would happen if Fudge does turn on Dumbledore with no warning? If one day the public is reading about him advising the Minister, and the next he's being denounced as crazy or misguided? Especially if Dumbledore has just told people something they don't want to hear about – like Voldemort returning."

"Surely everyone would know if he returned," McGonagall objected. "That would rally people around the Headmaster. Hogwarts was considered one of the few safe havens in the last war – primarily because of him."

"All the more reason to keep it quiet," Harry argued, "so no one has time to prepare. And if his followers can get Fudge to discredit Dumbledore... would most people *want* to believe that Voldemort had returned?"

McGonagall was looking vaguely ill as she shook her head.

"I've been reading some Muggle books on popular media and how public opinion is moulded," he explained. "One of the odd things is how when there is a schism between two parties, advantage goes to the one that attacks first – all other things being equal. They can do a lot of damage to the other side's reputation before it can be used to strike back, and any counterattacks lose credibility because it just looks like they are playing tit-for-tat."

McGonagall blinked. Twice. Harry didn't think she'd been expecting this at all. "Then all this...?" she asked, gesturing vaguely.

Harry nodded. "I'm hoping that some people will catch on to what's happening and start asking their own questions, but mostly I'm striking first, so Fudge will be de-fanged before he can turn on us."

"Mr. Potter, such tactics are... are scandalous in the extreme!" McGonagall objected. "No matter what the circumstances, you can't just behave like..."

"Like a Slytherin?" Harry asked. He shrugged and felt his shoulders sag. He'd been hoping that she'd actually get it. "Professor, I just

want to be alive to see my twentieth birthday and celebrate it with my family. My second family, that is – my first family is gone, thanks to the adults that were looking out for them.”

With that, he turned and walked out of the room, leaving a silent McGonagall behind him, staring out into space.

OoOoO

Harry was a little surprised to find his friends loitering in the hallway when he left McGonagall’s classroom. Too weary for another argument, he just raised an eyebrow.

“After last year, do you really think we’re letting you out of our sight again?” Ron asked with some exasperation.

Harry took a deep breath. “I suppose not.” He glanced over at Ginny curiously.

“Luna and I were just passing by,” she said unconvincingly.

Harry smiled and shook his head. At least some of them understood. That was enough.

OoOoO

The following Monday, the second after the attack, they received a pleasant surprise at breakfast. Bill Weasley was sitting at the staff table next to Professor McGonagall.

Ron and Ginny both goggled as their eldest brother gave them a little wave. Hermione grabbed Ron’s arm before he could stand up. “I’m sure he’ll be able to see us afterwards,” she whispered urgently.

Ron looked a bit rebellious, but nodded.

Before the food appeared, the Headmaster stood to make an announcement. “Today we will be having some visitors, not to mention alumni, on the grounds to help make some improvements. I know you will all make them feel welcome, but try not to interfere in anything they are doing. I know many of you will be brimming with

questions, and I would ask that those be directed towards your Head of House.”

With that, he sat down and the serving platters filled with food.

Harry noticed Ron was eating even faster than usual – which was saying a lot. Hermione would glance at him occasionally with an expression bordering somewhere between disbelief and dismay. But his attention was soon drawn to other Weasley brothers.

“You bloody well knew!” Fred hissed at Percy, who gave him a stern glare. George quickly glanced up towards the high table, evidently worried his twin had been overheard, but he didn’t look too pleased either.

“As Head Boy, I was required to assist the Deputy Headmistress with certain logistical arrangements for Masters Carpenter, Fitz-Williams, Holmes, and their crewmen. Bill was sent ahead to liaison with Hogwarts, since he was the most familiar with everyone. While I did speak to him, I was instructed not to divulge any of what I knew before it was announced.”

“But he’s our *brother*,” Fred insisted in an aggrieved tone. “You still should have told us, you great prat!”

Percy sniffed and raised his chin imperiously. “Then I would be abusing a position of trust. There is no doubt in my mind you two would have staged something *ridiculous* if you knew in advance.” Then he raised an eyebrow. “Besides, I rather thought it made for a nice surprise.”

Fred stared at Percy, his mouth slowly falling open. Then he turned to his brother. “Did he just prank us?” he asked in a shocked tone.

George looked thoughtful. “You know, I rather think he did. It wasn’t much of a prank, not by our standards, but when you consider the handicaps of the humour-impaired...”

Fred nodded. “You’re right, brother of mine. All things considered, this was rather spectacular. For Percy, anyway.”

Harry suppressed a grin as he turned back to find his plate already filled. Ginny didn't look his way once as he began to eat, but a small smile tugged at the corner of her mouth. Evidently she didn't want to take any chances where his continued skinniness and Mrs. Weasley's wrath were concerned.

OoOoO

When they all had a free period, the Gryffindors bundled up and made their way across the grounds to where the warding crews were getting set up. They'd seen no sight of them during that morning's run, so they'd evidently only just arrived. The three Masters were in close consultation with Dumbledore, McGonagall, and Flitwick. Bill stood off to the side, looking a little uncomfortable.

When he saw them approach, Bill strode over, hands stuffed into the pockets of his dragon-hide jacket to keep them warm. "Fancy meeting you lot here," he said with a grin.

Ginny, of course, abandoned all decorum at that point and bounded up to her big brother, giving him a tight hug. Ron was almost as eager, but held back at the last moment and gave Bill a firm handshake instead. That only widened Bill's grin.

"Mum's been going spare between your owls, you know," Ginny said after the rest of them said hello. "There are a lot of things written about the Chinese Ministry, and every time she reads something new, she gets to worrying again."

"I don't doubt that," Bill said seriously, "but that job's over now. We're back in England for the moment."

"For how long?" Ron asked.

Bill rubbed his jaw. "Might be a while. This is a pretty high-profile job, so everyone wants to make sure we do it right."

"Maybe not everyone," Hermione pointed out.

"That's true," Bill agreed. "I read the papers coming over. But warding private property to protect the residents is a fundamental right under



Wizarding Law. The Ministry can't afford to step on that many peoples' toes."

"But I thought Hogwarts was a public institution," Hermione objected.

"Technically, it's not," Bill corrected. "It's owned in whole by the Hogwarts Trust and managed by the Headmaster and the Board of Governors."

"Hogwarts Trust?" Harry asked curiously.

"One of Gringotts' largest vaults," Bill explained. "Supposedly the seed fund was started by the Founders themselves, and various alumni have contributed vast sums through the ages. The interest pays for most of the upkeep, staff salaries, and funds tuition for worthy students that otherwise couldn't afford to attend."

Harry wondered how Fudge ever managed to get his toady Umbridge installed as a professor, but didn't know how he could phrase the question. Maybe the Ministry had some leverage through the licensing and accreditation processes. It seemed rather odd. But then again, Fudge was known for sticking his nose where it didn't belong. Scrimgeour wasn't much better, now that he thought about it. Was it a common failing of Ministers?

As expected, Hermione had a few questions arising from her readings on wards, some of which had been prompted by the announcements of the past week. To her credit, she managed to hold off until the social pleasantries had been exchanged before she began politely picking the former Curse-Breaker's brain. From what Harry could understand of their conversation, it seemed that altering existing wards was a lot more complicated than just erecting new ones, as had been done at The Burrow.

That's not to say that he understood much of their increasingly technical jargon, but Harry was pleasantly surprised he'd comprehended that much. Hermione drove them mercilessly in their Arithmancy revision sessions. It grew even worse after Professor Vector explained how Arithmancy was the foundation of spell design theory. Harry had no doubt that the Muggle-born witch was taking her self-assigned role in their little group very seriously.

The bag of tricks Hermione produced during the ill-fated “Horcrux Hunt” had been a source of wonderment to both himself and Ron. Now, Harry could dimly see the origins of her modified spells and incredibly useful objects (like that bottomless beaded bag she seemed to carry one of *everything* in). At the time, she’d only had a few months to prepare for their journey. This time around, she’d hopefully have years, and Harry was both eager and a little apprehensive when he wondered what Hermione would come up with.

OoOoO

The ward modifications took the better part of two weeks. While most of the crew packed up and left, Bill announced that he was assigned to stay for an extra week to monitor the wards and periodically test for any ‘cumulative energy conflicts’ that might arise. Ron and Ginny were quite happy to hear that, and Harry was sure that they’d been missing their older brother since he’d left home.

The weekend after the wards were completed, the school celebrated by watching Ravenclaw systematically demolish Hufflepuff on the Quidditch pitch. Harry kept his wand in his hand the entire time, and some of the other students seemed a little uneasy – no doubt remembering the last game.

But no sooner was the Snitch released than the tension began to fade. Despite himself, Harry was drawn into the game with everyone else. Since their rematch with Hufflepuff was scheduled for next term, Oliver had been quite adamant about them learning as much as they could about both teams. But candidly, Harry had to admit that he still got a charge out of watching a good match. The Ravenclaw Chasers worked like a well-oiled machine, quite possibly as good as Katie, Angelina, and Alicia. The Hufflepuff Keeper was having a very long afternoon indeed. Cho Chang and Cedric Diggory certainly didn’t act like anything but keen competitors once they were in the air, but it was clear that only a miraculously quick catch by the Hufflepuff Seeker could save the game for them.

Harry’s eyes were glued to the Seekers, and he almost missed Bill joining them in the Gryffindor section of the stands. In the end, Cedric and Cho saw the Snitch at roughly the same instant. They were neck

and neck pursuing it, but a well-aimed Bludger forced Cedric to veer off at the last instant. Cho caught the Snitch, adding one hundred and fifty points to the Ravenclaw lead and sealing their victory.

Cedric seemed to accept the drubbing with aplomb, Harry noted with approval, taking time to shake the hands of his opponents and congratulate them on a good game. His team-mates followed his example, except they didn't kiss Cho Chang on the cheek. That last part triggered a few cat-calls from the Slytherin seats and a raucous cheer from the DA members scattered throughout the stands.

As the spectators began making their way back to the castle, Bill announced that he'd secured permission from Professor McGonagall to take Harry, Ron, and Ginny into Hogsmeade for dinner. They turned to him in surprise as Bill explained that Neville, Hermione, and Luna were invited as well, but he couldn't sign them out to leave the school grounds. It wasn't a Hogsmeade weekend and they weren't family members.

"What about Percy and the twins?" Ron asked, sounding a little suspicious.

"Percy is taking them with him," Bill answered. "As Head Boy, he can escort them off the grounds, since Mum and Dad owed McGonagall."

Harry grunted. The Transfiguration professor had been quite distant since their conversation regarding media ethics, but he supposed he didn't really have anyone but himself to blame for that.

"Well, Hermione and I can get ahead on our Ancient Runes," Neville said agreeably.

"And I still need to finish my Potions essay," Luna added.

Hermione looked a little disgruntled, but nodded. "I'm just a little curious, that's all," she admitted.

Bill shrugged. "Mum wanted us to all get together for dinner," he explained. "Not sure why it couldn't wait for the hols, but I find my life is a lot easier when I just smile and nod."

“That’s because you’ll probably be halfway around the world again by end of term,” Ginny replied with some asperity. “She decided to do something while you were actually here.”

Bill smiled. “Maybe I do travel a lot, but it pays well and it’s a good bit of fun too. Broadening the mind and all that.”

OoOoO

Harry kept a firm grip on his wand as they walked past the Dementors on guard duty. He noted that they stood quite a bit farther from the gates than he remembered. They also seemed to emanate a palpable sense of menace – even more than usual. He wondered if they were capable of feeling anger, if it upset them that they were repelled by the school wards now.

As disturbing as it might be, such a thought cheered him a little.

In the distance, he saw more of the ghastly beings, patrolling the perimeter of the school grounds. It was hard to guess how many of the things were on duty in the area, but the mass he’d seen during those chaotic moments at the end of the first Quidditch match suggested that it was quite a few.

Bill quickly led them away from the gates and towards the Three Broomsticks. With a quick nod to Madam Rosmerta, he gestured for them to head up the stairs to the private rooms. Harry stopped for a moment, pretending to re-tie his shoe so he could linger in the rear. He wasn’t exactly suspicious of Bill, but all this mystery was making him nervous.

Of course, his fears proved to be groundless. In the same room Augusta and Neville had met within were Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, along with Percy, Fred, and George.

Bill closed the door and began a variety of extremely complex-looking wand motions while Mrs. Weasley hugged each of them, exclaiming over how much they’d grown. Harry couldn’t help but notice the extra tight squeeze he received around his midsection – nor the approving smile Mrs. Weasley gave Ginny as she stepped back.

Clearly he wasn't being paranoid regarding the conspiracy to fatten him up.

As they sat down around a table laden with a rather nice dinner, Mr. Weasley cleared his throat. He glanced over at his eldest son, who gave him a firm nod. "Well," he began, "I thought it might be nice to take this opportunity to get together and discuss... some family business. Bill?"

Harry frowned, wondering where this was going.

"Harry," Bill said. "I'm not exactly sure why, but Dad asked me if I knew anything about Occlumency. I assumed the Ministry was instituting tighter security protocols, so I let him know that I'd been fully certified as part of my professional credentials. It wouldn't do to have the details of some of the jobs I've done available to anyone who can read my memories. Between that, and the oaths I've sworn, our clients' secrets are kept safe. I tried to reassure him that it wasn't too difficult to master, but then he told me he already knew how."

"We've already sent Charlie the book," Mr. Weasley cut in, "and he's working on it now. But I thought this might be a good time to include Bill in our plans."

Harry swallowed and managed to suppress his initial reaction. It was an overpowering sense of resentment that didn't seem right for him to be feeling, let alone expressing. Something inside of him was angry that he'd been led here and put into a corner like this, expected to spill his secrets on command.

In a flash of insight, Harry recognized this emotion – it was a proprietary sense of command, a feeling that only *he* should be making the decisions based on his future knowledge. It wasn't a very attractive thing to realize about himself, a sentiment that made him feel ashamed once it had been dragged out into the light. He took a deep breath and quashed his instinctive objections and tried to analyze the situation rationally.

Bill Weasley was no slouch as a wizard. He was a bonded Gringotts employee with extensive experience in both curse-breaking and ward construction. His exploits in the future timeline only bore this out.

Collapsing Durmstrang's wards in less than a night, no matter the horrific cost, was no minor achievement. His skill and experience could only be an asset.

Just as important were the emotional aspects. He was the Weasley's first-born child. They trusted him, so naturally they wouldn't wish to keep secrets from him. Well-intentioned or not, Harry had pulled most of the Weasley family into his mess, so he could not in good conscience demand that they exclude Bill without very good reasons.

Harry also realized that he shouldn't be acting like a dictator either. That was Voldemort's way. He'd started all of this, but Arthur and Molly were adults, and he had no right to make more than suggestions. He took a deep breath and blew it out slowly. "Do your oaths to Gringotts allow you to keep something secret, as long as it isn't a plot aimed at harming their interests?"

Now it was Bill's turn to frown. He looked thoughtful for a moment before nodding. "I don't think there would be any problems with that. Why? Are you planning to overthrow the Ministry?"

Harry blinked while Fred and George chuckled. "Not too far off the mark there," Fred murmured.

"Not quite," Harry assured Bill. He didn't acknowledge the glare Ginny was sending at the twins, but he was grateful nonetheless. "It's a long story, but I guess it really begins before I was even born."

Repetition actually made it easier for him to summarize the events that led Harry to his current situation. He'd actually practiced it silently in his own mind a few times when he was alone. No doubt there would come a day when he'd have to explain things to someone very quickly, and it was better to get the stumbling around done in private. The familiarity of his task also meant that he could focus more attention on his audience.

Bill Weasley kept a very neutral expression on his features, a trait no doubt cultivated in his current career. Still, Harry kept a close eye out for when his disbelief got the better of him – because that was probably the best time to pause for questions.

Surprisingly, that moment never came.

Bill sat silent for well over a minute after Harry finished. Then he nodded. "That explains a lot," he finally said. Harry was relieved by the dumbfounded expressions on the twins – he wasn't the only person caught off-balance by this calm acceptance.

Some of his surprise must have shown on his face, because Bill cracked a sudden grin. "Harry, what you've told me isn't that much more unbelievable than things I've already learned. Goldfarb *likes* you. No one has ever heard of him being more than faintly tolerant of a human being before. But a thirteen-year-old wizard has both his respect and something akin to admiration... if we weren't talking about a goblin and a human. He re-arranged the work-schedule for their crack ward-building team, and they are only just now catching up on the backlog. I'm told the late fees for the backlog came out of his own discretionary fund, something equally unheard of."

Harry closed his mouth with an audible snap. "All I did was tell him about Voldemort being after the Stone," he said after a moment. He knew Goldfarb had done him some favours, but this was far more than he expected.

"Harry, the Ministry wouldn't tell Gringotts if it was raining fire," Bill declared. "I know there was some mess with your aunt and uncle as well. Goldfarb was on the verge of sacking an entire acquisitions team before you met with him. After that, they were all taken off suspension. Whatever you told him must have let him off the hook, so he was gracious in turn. That's also not something you usually see in relations between wizards and goblins. I'm also willing to bet money you are behind the biggest public relations coup they've scored in centuries."

"I just owled Goldfarb about needing permission to use their ward formulae," Harry protested. "It was actually his idea."

Bill shook his head. "I know that Muggle-born girl you hung around with took enough notes that Dumbledore and Flitwick could have reverse-engineered it."

“Her name’s Hermione,” Ron objected, speaking up for the first time. He froze and slowly flushed as everyone turned to look at him. Harry gave Fred a sharp glare right as opened his mouth. George elbowed his twin and Fred subsided.

“That would have been like stealing though,” Harry said after a moment. “Just duplicating their work without compensating them for it. Right?”

Bill shrugged. “Technically, yes. But do you think Gringotts could sue Hogwarts and expect to win in a Ministry court? They’d be laughed out of the courtroom.”

“That doesn’t make it right,” Harry insisted stubbornly.

“What did I tell you?” Arthur asked Bill with a note of pride in his voice. Harry felt his cheeks warming for some reason.

“Yes, he does treat them just like people,” Bill agreed. “And it’s not an act. He does it reflexively, even in private. That explains a lot, given how well Goldfarb reads people.”

“So what does all this have to do with, er... what I was talking about?” Harry asked.

“Nothing directly,” Bill admitted, “Though it does mean you had a pretty unusual attitude for a wizard, to make that kind of impression. I’ve also heard a few stories about some of your magic, not to mention your little ‘study group’.”

“What kind of stories?” Harry asked in a worried tone.

“Oh, nothing too outrageous,” Bill replied airily. “I think the most credible is that the six of you are bucking to become Aurors directly after your N.E.W.T.s, hoping to place out of the Auror training – or maybe begin it while you’re still at Hogwarts.”

“I didn’t even know we could do that,” Ron said, raising his eyebrows.

“Normally you can’t, from what I heard,” Bill agreed. “Though there might be exceptions made for special circumstances.”



"I wasn't even thinking about becoming an Auror," Harry admitted.

"What do you want to do after you finish school?" Molly asked gently.

Harry looked up, brow knitted in confusion. "Honestly, I haven't been making many long-term plans," he finally said. "Not until Voldemort is gone."

That seemed to bother the matronly woman more than Harry thought it should.

"Anyway," Bill continued after a moment, "what you've told me fits with all the information I've gathered on my own, and everyone else here seems to accept it. I gather, with all the talk of magical oaths that you've given them one or two to back up what you are saying?"

Harry nodded. "I'll include you as well," he said, reaching for his wand.

"Don't worry about it," Bill answered quickly. "If my family accepts it, that's good enough for me. Magical oaths aren't something to bandy about too lightly – but you'll have one from me before we leave."

"Fair enough," Harry replied.

"I do have one question though," Bill added. "To satisfy my own morbid curiosity. I gather that none of us survived, but can you tell me what happened to me in this future of yours?"

Molly gasped. "Bill, you shouldn't ask him–"

"It's all right," Harry said quickly. "If he wants to know..."

Bill shrugged. "Might keep me from making the same stupid mistake twice around."

"I wasn't there, mind you," Harry began, "but word was brought back after the raid. In one of the most successful operations our side conducted in the war, you were one of the few casualties."

"Ah," Bill said disappointed. "But no details as to how I snuffed it?" he asked, ignoring the horrified glare from his mother.

Oddly enough, recalling his memories of that time weren't as painful as Harry had anticipated. On the other hand, the details were a little fuzzy as well. "I believe they said you'd overloaded your magical core initiating a seven-point cascading field collapse."

Bill's mouth dropped open. "A *seven*-?" he gasped. "But how? Why?"

Harry shook his head. "As I said, I don't have the details. I think you were a little rushed for time, you only had but one night before someone inside Durmstrang might have noticed you and the rest of the raiders."

Bill slumped back in his chair. "Durmstrang? In a night?" he asked after a moment, his tone one of numbed wonder. "I wish we'd ordered some Firewhiskey," he added after a moment.

OoOoO

By the end of the meal, Bill and his father had ironed out some tentative plans. Much of it involved code phrases that could be inserted into innocent-appearing correspondence. As he listened to Arthur outline the fairly complex system, Harry grew more and more impressed. He'd never known exactly what roles the man had played within the Order of the Phoenix during the first war, but he had a better idea now.

It was dark by the time they were finished, so Madam Rosmerta allowed them to use her Floo to travel directly back to the castle. After a few last minute admonitions from Mrs. Weasley, Percy led them back through the green fires to the Gryffindor common room. Harry mostly ignored the questioning looks of his house-mates, his mind occupied with the thick sheaf of parchment he clutched in his left hand.

As Bill and Mr. Weasley made their arrangements, Mrs. Weasley had pulled him aside, guiding him away from the table.

"Your godfather misses you quite a bit," she said softly as she handed him the bulging letter. "He's been an ideal guest, but I can tell he's counting the days until the end of the term. He didn't want to risk owling you, since he was afraid it might be traced back to The Burrow."

Instead he's been poring over some nasty-looking books I think he liberated from his family's library." She pursed her lips for a moment. "I'll see if I can't find an excuse to visit again in a week or so. I imagine he'd love to hear from you and I'll be more than happy to act as a go-between."

Harry wasn't too dense to recognize a politely-worded order when he heard one.

As he ascended the stairs to his room, he pondered the unexpected affability he sensed between Sirius and Mrs. Weasley. They certainly hadn't got along this well when they'd been staying at Grimmauld Place in the prior time-line.

Of course, both of them had hated being there. Molly was far more comfortable playing the host than being a guest, and Sirius disliked any reminders of his estranged family. As Harry recalled, they'd both been under considerable stress at the time. The Burrow was a far more congenial setting for both of them, leading Harry to wonder how much of their original friction was simply due to circumstances.

On the other hand, Harry remembered that he himself had been a major point of tension between the two of them. But thinking back, Harry recalled the gratitude that Sirius had displayed towards Mr. Weasley at Azkaban when he'd learned they'd become Harry's legal guardians after that mess with the Dursleys. Considering the alternative would likely have been Lucius Malfoy, it would definitely reduce any resentment over boundaries and roles in Harry's life.

It also didn't hurt that Harry himself didn't need as much adult guidance and support. At least, not as much as he remembered needing in the original timeline. The relationship between himself and Sirius was more than slightly muddled. It ranged between 'favourite uncle' and 'insane friend', often over the course of a single conversation. Trying to calculate their relative maturities, taking into account imprisonments and time travel, was little more than an exercise in frustration.

From one point of view, Harry was roughly the same age as Sirius. He just didn't feel like it most of the time. The whole thing was awkward and confusing in the extreme, especially when dealing with

his friends. He rather wished that other Harry Potter had considered all that before taking such drastic steps.

Harry sighed and sat down on his bed. Was he talking about himself in third person just then? Or did they both really have separate existences? Could that even be determined? Was he likely to go mad before or after he dealt with Voldemort?

Worrying about the possibilities of “before” occupied his mind so thoroughly that he barely noticed the door opening. But it was impossible to ignore Fred and George – especially when they sat down on his bed on either side of him. Both draped a companionable arm across his shoulders before they spoke, and Harry couldn’t help but notice how that prevented him from standing up without doing something elaborate.

“So, Harry,” Fred began, “we couldn’t help but notice that you knew a fair bit of detail about what happened to Bill in this future of yours.”

Harry gave him a hard look.

“We’ve already secured the door,” George assured him. “This isn’t the first time we’ve had a discussion we didn’t want overheard.”

“We’re even more careful with *your* secrets than our own,” Fred continued loftily. “Now spill.”

Harry sighed. He should have seen this coming. “It was a massive Death Eater attack on Diagon Alley. More than half the place was levelled in the fighting, but it was a pyrrhic victory for Voldemort because he lost so many men.”

“Were we fighting with the Aurors?” George asked in a serious tone, one that seemed almost alien coming from him or his brother.

“No, you were trapped when the Anti-Apparition wards went up,” Harry explained. “The building you were defending became the focal point as the attack bogged down. When it exploded, the Death Eaters attacking it were decimated.”

"Why were we so intent on defending one building?" Fred asked curiously.

Harry sighed. There wasn't any way around it now - they'd hound him mercilessly if they thought he was leaving something out. "Probably because it was your shop," he said.

"Our... shop?" George asked.

"Weasleys' Wizzarding Wheezes," Harry clarified. "One of the finest joke shops in Wizzarding Britain."

"*That's* why you knew about our plans at New Years!" George exclaimed. "We actually bloody did it!"

With that, both boys gave Harry a squeeze that wrung the air from his lungs. Before he'd had a chance to catch his breath, they were up and dancing a merry jig. George waved his wand and the door sprang open. Harry was just starting to stand up when they burst out onto the stairwell, continuing their ridiculous victory dance, unmindful of the broken bones they risked.

Harry started to call after them but stopped. What was the use? He sat back down, prodding his now-tender ribs. "Mental," he muttered, "the both of them."

OoOoO

Harry coughed as a cloud of rock dust wafted in his direction. Professor Lupin waved his wand and a sharp breeze dispersed the fumes. The granite block the professor had conjured was little more than a mound of fine gravel after Harry's *Reducto*. He nodded in satisfaction.

After their first few sessions within the castle had been interrupted, Professor Lupin suggested they move them outside to avoid interruptions. Harry was more than happy to agree. He'd been a little leery of really cutting loose inside the castle. Aside from the multitude of curious eyes and ears, he wasn't entirely sure what would happen.

The magnitude of even his most casually cast spells had increased steadily since his first year. While that was normal for most Hogwarts' students, the *degree* to which this was occurring for Harry was a little frightening. The amount of power he could summon up when he really tried was another matter entirely. Evidently the magic of his future self was still being assimilated.

Of course, that damn Patronus of his had blown things open for those with the knowledge to understand. Remus had questioned him rather closely about that in their first private session after Harry left the hospital wing.

Harry quite truthfully told him that he and his friends were practicing the spell on their own, as they didn't trust the creatures or the Ministry's promises to keep them under control. The revulsion in Harry's voice as he mentioned the extreme effect they had on him wasn't feigned in the slightest.

So that led them to a clearing near the edge of the Forbidden Forest, gauging exactly how much force Harry could generate. Professor Lupin stared at the pile of gravel for a moment before shaking his head. "I think we need to try something a little different," he said after a moment. "Harry, I'd like you to take a moment to prepare yourself. Think about the things that make you angry and consciously try to focus your energy on your wand. Keep doing that until you don't feel like you can build up anymore, then cast at the ground." He pointed to a small lump of rock, no doubt a mostly-buried boulder. "Try to cast *Reducto* with as much force as you can."

Harry followed these instructions, wondering what Professor Lupin was playing at. Hunkering down behind his Occlumency barriers, Harry began to replay the worst memories of the war. Though time and forgetfulness might have blurred a few, more recent ones bolstered his rage. Learning about his parents from Hagrid, he and his friends discovering Ginny lying in the Chamber, Melissa's death and the knowledge that he'd killed her as surely as if he'd wielded the knife himself. Through this, his wand began to quiver in his hand, slowly growing warm, then hot.

Finally, feeling like he was about to burst, Harry raised his wand and brought it down in a slashing motion. “*Reducto!*” he growled, and only when he tried to speak did he realize that his face was contorted into a rictus of fury.

A solid red bar of light exploded from his wand, striking the ground where he’d aimed with a detonation that blew him backwards off of his feet. Fortunately, he bounced when he struck the ground, and realized that Professor Lupin had cast a cushioning charm or three while he’d been focusing his rage. Harry awkwardly rolled into a crouch and looked up.

The rock was gone, as was the ground around it and below it. In their place was the beginning of a yard-wide trench gouged out of the earth for over ten feet. It angled deeper the farther it went, but Harry’s attention was drawn to his hand as the pain began to register.

He dropped his wand with a hiss, blowing on his throbbing palm and fingers. The grass seemed to curl away from the scorching-hot wood. Harry barely noticed when Professor Lupin cast a Cooling Charm on his hand, but let out a sigh of relief as the burning sensation eased. “Hot,” was all he could say as he got his breath back.

The man’s face was troubled when Harry looked up. “Sorry, Harry, but I didn’t anticipate something like *that* happening. Let’s get you to Madam Pomfrey so she can make sure no damage was done. I’m going to have to owl Ollivander and see if he’s ever heard of such a thing.”

Harry nodded dumbly as he stood up, and then stooped to pick up his wand. He initially touched it very gingerly with the fingertips of his left hand, but the unnatural heat had mostly dissipated.

On the way to the hospital wing, Harry asked Professor Lupin for a favour. “I know the NEWT-level Defence classes will be covering it, but would you mind coming to a meeting of the Duelling Association and talking about the Patronus Charm?”

That seemed to take the professor somewhat aback. “I thought you mostly ran those meetings?” he asked.

“With a lot of help,” Harry replied. “Besides, this is a pretty advanced spell.”

“You seem to do all right at it,” Lupin replied with a grin. The aging Marauder’s sense of humour was a bit more... *restrained*... than that of Sirius Black, but it was all the more effective for its subtlety.

“But you are the one who taught me,” Harry shot back. His words were true, just not quite in the way his audience would interpret them. “Besides, this... aptitude... I have may have made it easier for me. You’d probably do a better job explaining it to someone who doesn’t have so much excess energy.”

Lupin gave him a shrewd look. “You’ve really thought this through then. I thought you just didn’t want to draw more attention to yourself. But what I still don’t understand is why you even want to cover this in the Duelling Association. It’s not likely that they’ll use it in a duel, and with the new wards there will be no repeats of what happened at your Quidditch match.”

“But what about Hogsmeade weekends?” Harry countered. “Two-thirds of the school will be outside the wards the next time we have one. Unless they are all cancelled?”

Remus sighed. “I think the Headmaster considered it, but with the Ministry’s promises, most would think that was going too far.”

“Then it would probably be a good idea if more than a couple of people out there knew how to repel them, wouldn’t it?” Harry asked.

“You make a convincing argument, Harry,” Professor Lupin said as they made their way into the courtyard. “When is the next meeting scheduled?”

OoOoO

The short, round-shouldered man carefully adjusted his clothing as he approached the pub. The garments weren’t particularly comfortable, but they would serve their purpose. While doing this, he carefully reviewed his instructions. While the inhabitants of the pub were all Muggles, that didn’t mean they couldn’t be dangerous...



especially since these particular Muggles were no strangers to violence.

Still, the story he'd been given would attract their interest, and hopefully establish his credentials as sympathetic to their cause. His imagination refused to consider what might happen if his master's information was wrong. The immediate consequences of failure might be even more painful than displeasing the one he served.

His hand trembled slightly as he reached for the door.

Life had been much simpler as a rat.

OoOoO

Dear Sirius,

I was pleasantly surprised to get your letter. I can appreciate why we need to be discreet, but it never occurred to me to go through Mrs. Weasley. I supposed the old Marauder still has a few tricks left to show.

I suppose you heard in the press and from the Weasleys what happened at the match. My broom is wrecked, but I still have the 2001 the Nimbus company donated to the team. The worst part is what happened after I was knocked out. What happened to Melissa Bulstrode wasn't an accident. She was murdered, and I suppose it's really my fault...

Author Notes:

And so we come to the end of another chapter. Tensions are rising in the Wizarding World and people are starting to point fingers. Harry has a plan, but as we've seen before, his plans don't always go right.

Many thanks go out to Runsamok, Kokopelli, and SiriusSeeker for excellent beta work. Any mistakes in the final version are despite their heroic efforts to keep me on the straight and narrow.

And now a few polite suggestions for select portions of my readership:

Please realize that at least four pairs of eyes have gone over every new chapter before you see it. If you think you see a glaring canon error, you might want to double-check before bringing it up in a review visible on a public forum. Periodically some well-meaning soul ends up embarrassing themselves. Don't let this be you.

My blog (the address is in my profile) has the latest information and updates on chapter progress. I do not respond to private emails that say "when is the next chapter going to be ready?" with anything more than the URL. I'm paying those hosting fees for a reason, folks. grin

A few people have remarked that they don't like how merged-Harry reacts to things in this story. I'll let you in on a secret: At times, I don't either. No one could have gone through all the things that occurred in the future timeline and emerged unscathed. Harry has some serious issues to work through. Yes, he escalated things with Draco and Snape a lot faster than he needed to. That's because he never knew that Snape was working for Dumbledore (the portrait kept the promises made in life) and Voldemort discovered Snape's treachery and killed them both for it. I'd actually left it open to go either way before Deathly Hollows was released – you can check old Author Notes where this is discussed.

So yeah, Harry's reasoning can be flawed and his reactions can be overly emotional. Despite everything, he still has some growing up to do. But aren't perfect heroes kind of boring after a while?

## Chapter 36

Like most of his classmates, Harry was looking forwards to the end of term and going home for Christmas. It still struck him at times, how very different the idea of going home felt when home was The Burrow and not Privet Drive. The complete lack of dread was the biggest difference that came to mind.

Not that there weren't other things to keep his mind off the anticipation. Their morning runs became more and more unpleasant as the weather turned. At least the martial arts practice kept their blood warm before they showered for class. Neville's rustiness from the missed summer was more than gone. While he wasn't quite as quick as Harry or Ron, he was noticeably stronger – Harry had a collection of bruises to attest to this.

Harry had been tempted to use the Room of Requirement for their morning runs, especially as it grew colder, but he also knew that their morning training had acquired some attention. Pansy and Flint's ambush, not to mention the aftermath, had driven that point home. He didn't want anyone wondering where they were, so they continued to half-freeze in the mornings. Harry tried to tell himself that it was good training, but it was a hard sell.

At least the occasional practice sessions with Remus Lupin had changed in focus. Rather than seeing how much power Harry could generate, they instead worked on fine-tuning his control over how much he expended per spell. This change came shortly after Remus said he received a reply from Mr. Ollivander. The odd man never came out and said it, according to the last Marauder, but he strongly implied that their previous course of action was 'ill-advised'.

Given the wand-maker's propensity for elliptical dialogue and enigmatic silences, he might as well have screamed "Stop!" at the top of his lungs.

While that was worrisome, other aspects of his education were going better. Under Professor Slughorn's gimlet eye, Potions was becoming interesting. With his prohibitions against "foolish Gryffindor pranks" stymieing any potential Slytherin troublemaking, Harry – for the first time – was able to actually concentrate on what he was doing.

Hermione was subtly encouraged to ask more questions on the theories behind the instructions, and before he knew it, Harry was actually learning something about what he was brewing. It was all quite shocking. He'd known from the first class that Slughorn was no Snape, but it was nonetheless a pleasant surprise to discover he was actually able to keep his House in order. While there were still... unsavoury elements... in the Slytherin dungeons, they were keeping their heads down and not causing trouble for others, at least as far as he knew. But Harry knew he had enough to worry about without borrowing more trouble.

More encouraging was the gradual thawing of his relationship with his own Head of House. Despite their differences, they still had to work together on the Duelling Association meeting plans. The first few meetings after their argument had been horribly uncomfortable, but ironically it was these discussions that eventually led to their rapprochement.

"Professor Lupin?" she asked, her surprise overcoming her normal reserve.

"Yes, Professor," Harry confirmed. "He's the one that taught me the Patronus Charm over the summer."

McGonagall peered intently at him. Despite himself, Harry began to feel acutely self-conscious. "With the new additions to the school wards you have... arranged... Mr. Potter, is this still a pressing need?" The pauses in her question were not lost on Harry, making him want to wince.

"I'm more worried about Hogsmeade weekends," Harry replied. "I'm not comfortable leaving anyone to the nonexistent mercies of those creatures if I can prevent it." He'd already decided to ignore the subtle digs. His Head of House could deliver a surprisingly sarcastic turn of phrase when she wanted to, but trying to match that would only make things worse.

"I see," Professor McGonagall said, still eyeing him. "Is there a reason, Mr. Potter, that you feel personally responsible for the safety of your classmates? Do you perhaps plan to confiscate their wands

before they leave the grounds? Or are the Dementors here because of your actions?"

While her words were pointed, her tone wasn't entirely so. Harry swallowed, biting back his first reply, and decided to take her question literally. "Well, Professor, we started the Duelling Association because we've had some... bad luck... with Defence professors. If I don't do everything that occurs to me to address those shortcomings, well... then, in a way it would be my fault, wouldn't it?"

The professor just stared at him, with only an upward twitch of one eyebrow displaying emotion. "I hardly think that makes *you* responsible for the Defence Against the Dark Arts training of everyone attending Hogwarts," she said after a moment.

Harry shrugged. He should have known that they'd just end up arguing again. Still, she did ask. "I'm not," he agreed. "I can't make anyone join the DA. But I can help the people who do, so I have to do what I can for them. I suppose I am responsible for them, to some degree." He made a frustrated gesture. He knew he wasn't making a great deal of sense. "I know I'm not thinking of everything that could happen. I'm not clever enough, or experienced enough, to even come close. But if something does occur to me, and I didn't follow through on it and someone got hurt as a result... Well, I wouldn't be able to live with myself."

It was odd, how Harry's thoughts had turned. He'd just managed to articulate one of his greatest sources of stress to someone who'd added a great deal of it lately. The irony wasn't lost on him, but it did, oddly enough, make him feel just a bit better to express that.

Even stranger was the way she was now regarding him, clearly surprised by his words. "That is an... unusual... stance to take, Mr. Potter," she said after a moment. "But not one totally out of keeping with your character. Moreover, it also sheds a different light on some of your actions of late."

Harry did his best not to scowl. He didn't like to be reminded of her accusing him of acting Slytherin with respect to the Ministry.

If she noticed his demeanour, McGonagall gave no sign of it. "While I still do not condone your actions... I do find your reasons make them less objectionable than I had originally thought," she continued. "Given those priorities, I do agree that we can work Professor Lupin into the schedule to give a seminar on the Patronus Charm. I will caution him, however, that while he may wish to alert his upper forms, it should be made clear that their attendance is not mandatory for the Defence curriculum."

Harry frowned. "I'm afraid I do not understand."

"Official curriculum is decided by the Hogwarts' staff, which is led by the Headmaster," she explained. "Were it to get back to the Ministry that Hogwarts was requiring students to learn a charm designed to repel their designated agents, it would only create more difficulties. The actions of student-led organizations are under far less scrutiny, and moreover would not be our direct responsibility."

Harry nodded slowly as it all sunk in. It made sense, albeit of a twisted, bureaucratic sort. It occurred to him that he wasn't the only one capable of acting Slytherin towards the Ministry, but common sense forbade him voicing that thought.

The rest of the scheduling passed in a far less dramatic fashion, planning up through the winter hols. After promising to report to her after they returned to review their progress and schedule the new term, Harry was dismissed.

Harry smiled a little as he made his way to the Great Hall. Professor McGonagall's manner towards him had noticeably warmed by the end of the meeting.

While he could sense that she still disagreed with some of his methods, she also respected his reasons. "Agreeing to disagree" was frankly more than he'd hoped for from the stern professor, so he was happy to accept that.

Of course, a few days later Harry was wishing some of his professors were a bit more aloof. He'd known, objectively anyway, that this was coming. The quid pro quo had to be fulfilled.

It still didn't help when the owls arrived with their invitations to their first Slug Club soiree.

On the plus side, it seemed Professor Slughorn had picked up on a few hints and invited all six of them, rather than trying to cherry-pick a few. Harry didn't think it would make Ron or the others jealous, not from the expression of distaste on his friend's face as he read the invitation, his eggs cooling and his bacon going soggy. On the other hand, Harry knew they'd like it less if they weren't all there to watch each other's backs. Besides, if Harry was right about the real purpose of the Slug Club, it wouldn't hurt to spread the largesse around a little.

Neville seemed pretty resigned to going, making Harry wonder how many stuffy parties he'd been dragged to as a child. The girls seemed awfully cheery about it, for reasons Harry didn't want to think about too hard.

Only Ron was really reluctant. Harry asked him about it as they were getting ready. They decided to just go in their school robes, as it was a school function, though Harry vaguely remembered a few people being dressed up before. Or was it just the visiting adults? It bothered him a little that he couldn't really remember, but then again it was a long time ago, and such a minor detail. Hardly worth worrying about, really.

It was almost a relief, really, to focus on something a bit more concrete, like Ron's scowl as he combed back his hair, trying to get it to lie down over his ears.

"You seem less than enthused," Harry said as he wet his own comb.

Ron shrugged. "Doesn't feel too right," he said shortly.

Harry sighed. "You want to spit it out, or are we going to play Twenty Questions all night?"

Ron blew out a breath. "Look, it's not your fault, I know that. But I also know that you are the only reason I'm invited, and I'm trying not to be a prat about it."

“What makes you think you don’t belong?” Harry asked. “Have you looked at your marks lately? Not to mention being Oliver’s anointed heir at the hoops?”

“I wrote Mum, you know,” Ron said, staring into the mirror. “To ask her what she thought of all this. She didn’t have much nice to say about Slughorn. Didn’t think much of Weasleys when Dad was one of his students. Never invited him to anything like this.”

“Oh,” Harry said. Now that he thought about it, he remembered Mrs. Weasley telling the other him something similar once upon a never. “Percy’s going to be there.”

“Head Boy, professional suck-up, and not exactly my favourite brother at the moment,” Ron said flatly. “Not helping, Harry.”

Harry muffled a snort. Despite the lessening estrangement, the differences between the Weasley brothers were still quite apparent. “Okay, so Slughorn snubbed your dad a long time ago. He’s got to be kicking himself about it now.”

“Yeah, it would definitely give him an in on getting close to you,” Ron replied, though not in a totally unfriendly fashion. More like someone pointing out a bit of dung on your shoe.

“More like getting close to you and your brothers, too,” Harry pointed out.

Ron turned to look at him.

“Professional Curse-Breakers dual trained as Ward Jockeys are not a dime a dozen,” Harry observed. “I don’t think Gringotts wastes time hiring ninnies, do you? And I don’t think ‘useless’ is how you describe someone who became a professional Dragon-Trainer right out of Hogwarts. There are at least two Head Boys in Arthur Weasley’s brood, and there’s no telling what the twins will get up to if they don’t blow themselves up first.”

“At least two...? No way in hell, Harry,” Ron objected. “I know you’ve got that locked up seventh year. More likely Dumbledore will pick Fred or George as a lark, wanting to liven things up a bit.”



Harry suppressed a shudder at the thought of either of the Weasley twins being Head Boy. "I don't think I've got a chance," Harry observed philosophically. "There's no way Dumbledore will pick someone he doesn't trust. Not after seeing what Riddle got up to under Dippet."

"That's a long way off, Harry, and..." Ron broke off. "And you're changing the topic of conversation, aren't you?"

"Maybe," Harry admitted. "But don't sell you or your brothers' achievements short. Look, I don't idolize the man, but you have to admit Potions has been much more bearable this year, right?"

Ron nodded. "Too true, but after Snape, that isn't saying much."

"Yeah, but look at how he did it," Harry reminded his friend. "He out-thought and out-manoeuvred them from the very start - the Slytherins. The house that's supposed to embody cleverness and guile never had a chance, did they?"

"What are you getting at?" Ron asked.

"Just this," Harry said, "Slughorn is pretty good at social games like that and making useful contacts is his way of keeping score. It's pretty Slytherin, but it's also mostly harmless as well. He trades favours and information back and forth in ways that benefit people in his little network, incidentally making sure he comes out ahead. It's a lot more tolerable way of getting ahead than killing people and ruining lives, right?"

"Okay, I get it," Ron said. "He's no Death Eater, that's for sure. Doubt he could even fit in the robes."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Ron, I don't want you to accept that he's harmless. I want you to watch what he does and how he does it. He might introduce us to some people that can help us in the future, but more importantly I want you to get a look at how he operates. We need that skill, Ron. We need someone like Slughorn that we can explicitly trust."

Ron blinked, clearly taken aback. “Why me? Why not Hermione or Ginny? People will tell pretty girls things they’d never tell me.”

Harry shrugged. “I know Hermione’s going to watch as well, but she’s not as good with people. Her idea of how people *should* act tends to get in the way. Ginny could be good too, but she doesn’t have your head for tactics *or* strategy.”

“Don’t let her hear you say that,” Ron warned him. “You know, the more you talk, the more this just sounds like a big chess game.” He scowled abruptly. “Do you and Hermione always have to make something about chess when you want me to do something? You make me sound like some complete nutter who can’t think of anything else!”

Harry jumped a little at his friend’s vehemence. Guiltily, he realized he had a point, too. “Well, maybe it’s because once you do look at something like a chess scenario, your brain goes into overdrive and you arrive at an answer so bloody quick it gives Hermione the colly-wobbles.”

“Oh,” Ron said, and turned back to the mirror. He finished straightening up as Harry fought a valiant rear-guard action against his perpetually unruly hair.

Just as Harry was giving it up as a bad job, Ron turned back to him with an odd expression on his face. “She thinks I’m clever?” he asked.

Harry worked very hard at suppressing a snicker.

OoOoO

As they entered Professor Slughorn’s magically expanded office, Harry was slightly amused to see that for once he wasn’t the most nervous person in the room. As soon as they passed the gaudy crimson, gold, and emerald wall hangings, his friends instantly adopted the tight formation they normally used in chaotic crowds such as at Kings Crossing. He didn’t doubt for a moment that a single sharp noise would have instantly produced a wand in most of their hands.

Even more gratifying, in a totally childish way, were the reactions of the other attendees. Harry saw some of the Slytherin upper forms freeze in their tracks when they saw the Gryffindors arrive. He didn't doubt that the stories of last year's ambush in the courtyard had been wildly exaggerated over the summer. He idly wondered if they were looking for horns and a tail. Maybe some bat wings and eau de brimstone...

The scattering of older Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff students looked more curious than alarmed, much to Harry's relief. Cedric and Cho were there, quite obviously together, and he gave them a smile and a nod at their friendly waves.

He caught Percy's eye as the Head Boy nodded seriously, clearly attending to their host's every word. It might have been Harry's imagination, but he thought the Head Boy's manner had a slightly watchful quality to it, something that had been missing from the mindless sycophant his other self had known and resented until he'd received word of his death. Still, Harry had little doubt that Percy could do his career no small amount of good here.

The Head Boy earned a smile of gratitude from their host when he pointed out Harry's arrival to Professor Slughorn. Harry braced himself as the round little man descended on them.

The next few minutes were a whirl as Slughorn introduced his latest trophy to well over a dozen adults who were attending the party. Most of them seemed rather bored, but perked up when Harry's name was dropped. The Boy Who Lived grinned and bore it, but made a point of introducing his friends as well. Slughorn seemed to take the hint that the Gryffindors were truly a package deal and began including them in the introductions as well. Ron was a bit startled when an older grey-haired witch asked if he was Arthur Weasley's son. It turned out she knew the elder Weasley before she retired from the Ministry. Harry suppressed a grin as he saw Ron's features grow more and more intent. It really was just like watching him get into a chess game.

Ginny caught his eye and smirked, but Harry just shrugged. He was being straightforward with his friend when he said he wanted him in this, and fully engaged. Luna, on the other hand, was quieter than he

remembered, though she also stood next to Neville almost constantly. Harry wondered if she was self-conscious about bringing disapproval onto Neville again, or if she didn't speak up as much because she felt more secure.

Hermione, on the other hand, had a faint but unmistakable look of disapproval on her face. Harry excused himself from a conversation between Percy, Cedric, Ron, and Professor Slughorn regarding Percy's incipient entry into the Ministry and joined Ginny and Hermione at the overly ornate punch bowl.

"All right?" Harry asked quietly.

Ginny gave Harry a grateful look. Apparently Hermione had been working herself into quite a state.

"I'm sorry," his friend said. "I'm just having trouble with... all of this."

"All of this'?" Harry asked quietly.

"This," Hermione repeated, gesturing at the rest of the room. "Back room deals. Trading favours. Bartering influence. My parents had to deal with a lot of this with the National Health Service contracts, and I've heard them talk about this sort of thing. I don't want to spoil your plans, Harry, but... this just isn't right."

Hermione actually looked to be on the verge of tears and Harry mentally kicked himself. She was a lot more upset than she let on, and he belatedly realized she'd been putting up a brave front. He racked his brain for a moment, trying to find a way to explain, quickly, why this was important. "Hermione, do you like hurting people?" he finally asked.

"What?" she asked. "No! Of course not!"

"But we still know a lot of curses, don't we?" Harry asked. "Every day we practice magic that could put someone in a lot of pain."

"But we only do that so..." her voice trailed off. "I see. So this is only about... that thing we discussed on the seventh floor?"

Harry nodded, and then leaned closer. "Do you think I really came here to get some cushy Ministry job in the future?" He shuddered. "If I had my druthers, I'd play Quidditch professionally for a few years, save up my salary, get married and have a family, then retire to coach or manage my investments." He paused for a moment, and then continued. "Not necessarily in that order, but I'd rather do something I *know* I'm good at, something where any success I have I know is deserved." Harry swallowed, a little embarrassed at his outburst. The faint smile of approval Ginny was giving him was not helping one damn bit.

Hermione was still frowning, but now it was more thoughtful than upset. "So all this...?" she asked, waving her hand around to indicate the room in general.

"Is to help ensure we're allowed to do that," Harry confirmed. "And it's not just our immediate problem either, you know. Have you ever asked Mr. Weasley how many Muggle-borns work at the Ministry?"

Hermione slowly shook her head, her frown deepening.

"Well, it's not as many as should be," Harry continued, his voice growing more intent as it dropped to a whisper. "It would be better if government work was a strict meritocracy, but we both know that isn't the case anywhere. But what we can do is try to stamp out these ridiculous blood-prejudices. And that means you, little Miss Highest-Scoring Student in however many years who just happens to be a Muggle-born, need to meet the people with influence and show them just who you are, so they can see blood means bollocks. And once you're the Minister of Magic, you can bloody well fire the bigots, right?"

Hermione blinked at that last bit and actually giggled slightly, leaving Harry to wonder if someone had tampered with the punch. She smiled at him for a moment as she digested all that, then gave him a firm nod. "So this isn't just about the ends justifying the means, is it? Thanks, Harry." And with that, she strode over to where Ron was listening to Professor Slughorn's reminiscences. As Harry watched, it wasn't long before she joined into the conversation easily and without a hint of awkwardness.

"I don't hold out much hope for your dream," a voice said in his ear, making Harry jump and turn around. Ginny was still standing there. He stared at her dumbly. She'd been increasingly quiet around him over the course of the term. Not really unfriendly, really, more like just not having much to say. Things were still a little awkward between them. There weren't any secrets, not anymore. But as she was well aware, he was still heavily conflicted where she was concerned. Part of him was still getting to know a girl he'd already opened up to more than anyone in this existence. But part of him saw her and remembered a different Ginny. The whole thing made him excruciatingly uncomfortable at times, because he wasn't always comfortable with the... appropriateness of his feelings. Part of him, the memories of his older self was just that – older. Old enough that seeing this Ginny as that Ginny raised some moral quandaries of a sort he'd rather not think on too hard. Even if he'd never... well... nevermind.

Ginny seemed to accept this diffidence, at least for the moment. Perhaps she hoped, as he did, that it would become less of an issue as they both aged. But she always seemed to be watching him. Waiting. And she occasionally made him very, very nervous. "Y-you don't?" he asked, rather stupidly in his opinion.

Ginny shook her head, and this close up. Harry couldn't help but notice the errant colours of the individual hairs. "I don't think you will ever be *just* a Quidditch player," she confirmed in a low voice. "Not after hearing you give a speech like that."

Harry frowned. "What are you talking about?" he finally asked. "All I did was explain why I think this isn't a complete waste of time."

Ginny shook her head, grinning. "You addressed her fears, gave her a solid moral justification, and then set a long-term goal for her to pursue. Did you actually read all of those Muggle psychology books you bought?"

Harry nodded warily. "Yeah, but evidently not as well as you did. Last summer?"

Ginny nodded. "I don't just read poetry," she informed him in a crisp voice. "Besides," she added with a grin, "didn't we agree that girls are smarter than boys?"

OoOoO

By the time they returned to Gryffindor Tower, each of them tightly clutching a pass signed by Professor Slughorn, Harry's throat was dry and his jaws actually ached from a combination of smiling and talking too much. Hermione and Ron had their heads together, thick as thieves and oblivious to the rest of them as they verbally compared notes. Hermione mentioned drawing up some sort of influence chart and Ron replied he'd be eager to see it, nearly causing Harry to step off into thin air as a stairway moved out of the way.

Neville just looked a bit tired. He'd been monopolized by friends of his grandmother and his great uncle most of the night, and didn't appear to have enjoyed it that much. He gave a tired grin though, when Luna shyly took his hand.

When Harry's gaze wandered over to Ginny, he found her looking right back at him, causing him to quickly look away. The staircase returned at that moment, so he took the opportunity to begin climbing again. But Ginny didn't let it go.

"Checking over the troops?" she whispered quietly, leaning close.

Harry eyed her sidelong. "Hush you," he replied just as quietly.

"Not something to be ashamed of," she replied easily. "Actually, I think it's rather sweet," she added with a grin.

Harry just shrugged, refusing to be baited.

"Nothing wrong with looking out for your friends," she added. "That's not just a Hufflepuff trait, you know. Just make sure you let them look out for you as well."

"Yes, Mum," Harry quipped.

“Prat,” she said with a small smile. “You *don’t* want me acting like Mum. Ron says I do a pretty good impression of her.”

“Must be the genes,” Harry said as they approached the floor with the Fat Lady’s portrait.

Ginny rolled her eyes. “In case you haven’t guessed, she’s made me pretty much responsible for your physical condition when we return to The Burrow.”

“I caught that much,” Harry admitted. “I suppose Ron is in charge of making sure I sleep at night.”

Ginny gave him a quick look that informed him his guess was spot on. “I imagine so. It’s not like she’s the only one that’s worried about you, you know. She’s just...”

“Being motherly,” Harry finished for her. He shrugged. “I don’t really mind that much.”

“I noticed,” Ginny said. “Which is sort of odd, you being a boy and all. It’s not very macho, is it?”

Harry grinned, a little wistfully. “Not really; I missed you guys a lot, you know?”

Ginny frowned, and then looked stricken for a moment. “Sorry, I forgot. I. uh, I didn’t really think, you know...”

Harry could see her struggling with her words, not wanting to mention anything too incriminating in the hallway. “I know. The longer I’m here, the more... well... I’m sleeping a bit better these days, if you know what I mean.”

Ginny nodded, biting her lip. “That’s good, I think. Er, it is, isn’t it?”

Harry nodded. “I think so. And I think it’s good that I’m acting... well, maybe a little more normal?”

Ginny grinned. “Normal for you, anyway.”



Harry grunted. "I suppose."

OoOoO

The next Potions class ended rather oddly, with Professor Slughorn minutely examining Harry's potion, swishing it in the vial. With a frown, the portly professor asked him to stay after class, implying that his results were less than acceptable.

Ron nodded to Harry as he and the other students packed up their bags and filed out. Nothing was said, but Harry knew the others would linger in the corridor until he emerged. It wasn't so much distrust of their professor as a determination to never again be caught off guard.

Besides, was it truly paranoia if you knew someone really was out to get you?

Once they were alone, Harry approached Slughorn's desk and asked if something was wrong with his potion.

"What? Oh no, my boy!" the man replied. "Your work is just as superlative as ever. I just wanted an excuse for us to chat a bit, away from curious ears. Did you enjoy my little gathering the other night?"

Harry relaxed slightly and nodded. "Yes, it was quite fascinating. You were not joking in the slightest when you said you knew a lot of people at the Ministry." Harry suspected the man had another reason why he wanted to talk to him, but knew he had to play along for the moment.

Slughorn beamed. "I'll admit I was a bit worried," he said. "There was a bit of excitement from people when they realized you'd likely be there. I even received several requests for invitations from old friends who'd never shown an interest in attending before... but I didn't want to overwhelm everyone."

Harry could recognize a hint when he heard one. "Perhaps we can do that again, maybe next term, and you can accommodate some of the others?"

The professor nodded happily, and Harry wondered if that was it. Then the man cleared his throat nervously. "I, ah, understand there was a bit of unpleasantness last year," he ventured, "involving a rather large Basilisk?"

Now Harry understood where this was going. "Er, yeah, there was," Harry confirmed in a low voice. "We ended up killing it, but it was a close thing. I assume the Headmaster told you?"

Slughorn nodded. "He did mention it, in general terms. About how large was this beast?"

Harry shrugged. "Fifty or sixty feet."

Slughorn blinked. "Did you say fifty or sixty... feet?"

Harry nodded.

The corpulent professor staggered back a step as all of the colour drained out of his face. Harry recalled the man's reaction to Hagrid's collection of magical animal by-products and began to worry about the Slytherin's heart. "Good heavens, Harry! Do you know how much that's worth?"

"Wouldn't it be decomposing by now?" Harry asked.

"Not in less than a year, young man," Slughorn assured him in his best lecturing tone. "The normal processes of decomposition will be delayed until the Basilisk's venom has lost most of its potency. The poisonous essence suffuses the Basilisk's entire body, and it's so strong and so inimical to other forms of life that fully grown specimens are immune to diseases of any sort. In this case, it's barely been half a year, so the body should be intact."

Harry frowned. He wondered why no one had sought to reclaim it in the previous timeline, aside from the fact that doing so would require a Parselmouth to open the passage. Perhaps there had just been too much going on. "Would you happen to know buyers who might be interested in Basilisk parts?" he asked after a moment – already knowing the answer.

“Why, yes, I would,” Professor Slughorn confirmed with a wide smile. “Several of my former students are quite adept at brokering rare ingredients. Jacob Reeves, for example, holds the exclusive contract for St. Mungo’s. I’m sure, for a small commission, we can get you top prices – you’ll be the recipient of a tidy fortune.”

Harry waved his hands. “Wait a second, there are a couple of problems. First we have to get it out of the Chamber.”

Slughorn nodded. “But I understand that you can... facilitate access to the creature’s lair?”

Harry’s eyes narrowed. “Dumbledore told you that?”

Slughorn nodded. “Don’t worry; I’m hardly one to support that ridiculous superstition. I understand that one of my great-great uncles had the same ability.” The way the professor drew himself up proudly after that statement sorely tested Harry’s ability to keep a straight face. “From what I understand, the Headmaster has little interest in claiming a share on behalf of the school itself. I imagine he’d rather this was all taken care of with as little fuss as possible.”

That last aspect hadn’t really occurred to Harry before. The last thing Dumbledore wanted to do was publicize the fact that an enormous Basilisk had been living under Hogwarts for centuries. That might get people wondering what else might be laired below the dungeons. Not terribly comforting thoughts for the parents of the next crop of firsties.

But that didn’t change Harry’s other stipulation. “I’ll open the passage,” he said to Slughorn’s delight. “But remember that I wasn’t the only one down there. My friends were there as well. It was all six of us – I think we should all share equally.”

“That’s very generous of you,” Slughorn commended him. The way the old man’s fingers were twitching, Harry imagined he was already contemplating how many crystallized pineapple bits and fine liqueurs his share of the commission would net him.

“Not really,” Harry said firmly, hoping to make his point. “It was massed spell fire from all of us that took it down. They earned any reward as much as I.”

Slughorn swallowed hard and looked a bit queasy. Thinking about fighting a Basilisk that large, in close quarters, was more than enough to dispel his pleasantly greedy haze. “Yes. Well. Albus said he’d like to have this taken care of while school is not in session.”

“I can see that. Hardly anyone from Gryffindor has signed up to stay here over the holidays. Is the same true for the other houses?”

Slughorn nodded, regaining a little of his gleeful anticipation. “I’ve already confirmed with the other Heads. So when should I expect you all?”

Harry shrugged. “That’s really up to my guardians, not to mention the Grangers, Madam Longbottom, and Mr. Lovegood.” He made a face, wondering how much Hermione had really told her parents about what happened in the Chamber. Mr. Granger hadn’t ever tried to kill him, so he doubted she’d been totally straightforward about the danger she’d been in.

Slughorn frowned. “I’d better owl them immediately.” Harry wondered idly if his discomfort was because of the extra complications or because the inclusion of more adults meant more haggling over his commission. Harry didn’t really care – he considered payment for the Basilisk parts to be more like ‘found money’ – but parents whose children had been in danger might feel differently.

To be honest, he wasn’t sure how all of them would react, and it made him a little nervous. Hermione, at the least, might not have been totally forthcoming with her parents regarding the events of last spring. However, it wouldn’t be fair to not divide the windfall with everyone who was down there. At least he could warn everyone that Professor Slughorn would be contacting their parents and let them take it from there.

“I’ll let my friends know,” Harry assured him. “Thanks for organizing all of this, sir.”

“Oh, my pleasure, dear boy, my pleasure,” the portly professor assured him with a smile.

OoOoO

As he rather suspected, Harry's news had Hermione *and* Neville writing some quick letters that evening. At dinner, Harry couldn't help but notice Ginny's face fall as she watched Hermione frantically revise the letter she was sending her parents. But when she glanced at him, the red-headed girl's eyes hardened and Harry suspected he was in trouble.

Sure enough, as the group returned to the Gryffindor common room after a brief stop at the Owlery, Ginny held him back with a very firm grip on his elbow.

Watching the rest of his friends file in past the Fat Lady, Harry sighed and turned to her. "Was there something?" he asked mildly as she dragged him several paces down the hallway from the now curious portrait.

"What is this about it being split six ways?" she asked in a low voice, her eyebrows drawn together in a fierce scowl. For some reason, Harry thought it looked extremely cute on her. He wisely decided not to voice this sentiment.

Instead he just shrugged. He wasn't nearly as good as Ron at that gesture, but it would have to do. "There were six of us down there. It seemed the fairest way to do it." He looked over his shoulder at the Fat Lady's portrait. With a nod, he indicated they should move a little farther down the corridor.

"Five of you killed that great nasty thing," Ginny reminded him as they walked. "And the other one was the reason you were down there, rescuing an idiot," she added bitterly.

Harry winced. "I... look, it definitely wasn't your fault. Whoever set that up did a really good job of it, you know. If anyone's at fault, it should be me. I should have secured that stupid diary better."

"But I'm the one that read it," Ginny insisted, looking more and more upset. Harry wondered how long she'd been carrying this guilt around. He was a little upset that she hadn't said anything... a split-second before realizing the massive hypocrisy of that sentiment. He had no business complaining about anyone keeping things bottled up.

"You had no reason not to," Harry said firmly. "I'm just sorry that the bastards who sent it to you were able to use my name on it to trick you."

Ginny made a frustrated noise. "I just feel so stupid about the whole thing. And weak."

"Definitely not weak," Harry corrected her.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Remember what the spectre told us? Your will was so strong he couldn't keep you controlled for very long, or even suppress your memory," he reminded her. "That's a big difference," he added, then wanted to kick himself.

"Difference?" Ginny asked, her eyes narrowing. "You said this had happened, you know, *before*. Was that other... person... affected that way?"

Harry grimaced. He didn't like where this was heading, but he'd promised that once he could tell them the truth he wouldn't hold anything back. "Uh, several times. And she had no clear memory afterwards."

"She sicced that... that thing on students?" Ginny asked in a stricken voice.

"Well, yeah, but no one was killed. They didn't get a clear look, they were just temporarily Petrified," Harry assured her.

Ginny sagged back against the stone wall, looking decidedly ill.

"It doesn't matter," Harry said quickly. "It didn't happen. No one was hurt. Everyone is fine. You did... better. And it helped. A lot."

"But why?" Ginny asked after taking a moment to gather herself.

Harry considered her question. "I think... I think it originally took advantage of some... insecurities she had. Things it could capitalize on."

Ginny frowned. "That explains a lot. You went out of your way to reassure me and make me feel included the summer before I started. Was that why?" she asked suddenly, "Just in case?"

Harry swallowed convulsively. "No, that's not why," he insisted. "At least not all of it. I mean, well. Look. We talked, or rather a 'you' and a 'me' talked about that whole mess once. And that 'you' said those feelings were one reason why that thing was able to get its hooks in good. So, yeah, because of that, I knew how it was for you starting Hogwarts, how left out you felt." He took a deep breath. "And that's one reason why I wrote all those letters."

Ginny just stared at him for an uncomfortably long time. Finally, she just sighed and shook her head. "I don't need you protecting me from everything, Harry."

Harry shoved his hands into his pockets to stop them from fidgeting. "I know you don't need it, Ginny, but that's not going to stop me from trying. I just can't help it. When you're cut, I bleed." He couldn't remember where he'd read that, but it seemed particularly apt. He'd nearly lost it in a Duelling Association meeting when she slipped and hit her head.

Ginny's lips pursed in annoyance, but her eyes weren't as hard. "You're impossible, you know that, right?"

Harry shrugged again. He was getting better at it. "We'd better head in before curfew."

OoOoO

Harry had a rather bad shock in the days before they went home for the Christmas hols. They'd been revising in the Gryffindor common room when Ron reminded Ginny to retrieve her Transfigured Christmas ornament from the tree. With a disgusted sigh, she flounced over to the tree and pulled something from the branch that she quickly concealed in her robes.

"What did you make?" Hermione asked curiously.

Ginny gave her a betrayed look, but reluctantly pulled the bauble out of her pocket and held it out for them to see.

It was a shiny metallic ball, coloured a rich shade of green. A very familiar shade of green. Harry felt his heart stop.

“I wasn’t having a very good day,” Ginny said truculently, “and I couldn’t really think of anything to add to it.”

“I think it’s quite nice,” Hermione reassured her. “That’s a lovely colour on it; does it signify anything?” Harry remembered discussing the Weasley ornament tradition with her last term. Hermione thought it was quite intriguing, and was glad she’d saved her own ornament to show her parents.

Luna spoke up. “I think it’s the same shade as Harry’s eyes.”

Ginny shrugged, but Harry thought her complexion was reddening a little. He tried to remember when he’d made an ornament like that. So close to the holidays, was he thinking about his mother’s eyes?

But such speculation was beyond him as he stood up, murmured something about a headache and quickly made his way up the stairs to his dormitory.

He spent a good bit of time on his bed, shivering and wondering if this was another warning of future parallels with his past. When he finally fell asleep, he dreamt of a time he’d looked at another metallic green bauble.

The morning could not come soon enough.

OoOoO

The ride to Kings Crossing was blessedly uneventful – much to Harry’s relief. The worst part was the carriage ride past the patrolling Dementors, but with some forewarning even an incorporeal Patronus mist inside the carriage was enough to block them out. Harry just gritted his teeth and resisted the urge to unleash Prongs on the foul things.



However, when they disembarked from the train, they discovered a welcoming committee on the platform. *All* of the parents were there – Arthur, standing next to Molly, had evidently taken off from work, and there was a thin, slightly cross-eyed man with wispy white hair that Harry recognized as Luna’s father. Augusta Longbottom and the Grangers were there as well, and Harry mentally compared them to a firing squad.

Arthur looked around a bit nervously, and then stepped forwards. “Ah good, you’re... you’re all here. Well, we all got together and thought it might be a good idea to discuss some things.” Mr. Granger’s scowl deepened and Harry thought he could hear Hermione swallowing behind him. “I’ve got a private room reserved at the Leaky Cauldron,” he continued, “so we can get right to it.”

Molly bustled forward. “Bring the Anglia around,” she suggested, though her smile seemed a bit forced, and Harry wondered what the hell had been discussed before they arrived. “We’ll meet you out front.”

Arthur nodded and took off towards the platform exit at what Harry would describe as a *very* fast walk.

As they rolled their trunks towards the group of assembled parents, Harry felt like he was going into battle. Mr. Granger still looked angry and Mrs. Granger didn’t look too happy either. Harry supposed he shouldn’t be surprised by that, but Ron positioning himself beside Hermione was a little unexpected. He knew his friend was a little intimidated by Hermione’s father, but he was still willing to brave that to support her. It was a nice gesture, but this could get ugly quickly.

Fortunately, the fragile peace held for a while longer. None of the adults, no matter how upset, seemed eager to make a scene in public. There was a strained silence as they made their way to the street. The Grangers did not seem eager to pile into the Ford Anglia with everyone else, and took their own car. Augusta Longbottom eyed the Anglia rather warily, but followed Neville into it without a word. Hermione rode with her parents, but didn’t seem very enthusiastic about it. She seemed relieved when Luna innocently asked if she could ride with them, explaining that she’d never been in a Muggle

car before. Her father, chatting animatedly with an uncomfortable-looking Arthur Weasley, didn't seem to care.

Hermione was awfully quiet when they all disembarked on Charing Cross road. Luna kept asking Mr. Granger questions. Harry couldn't hear them, but Mr. Granger seemed oddly disconcerted. Harry was amused to note that the two parking spaces in front of the pub appeared to have been affected by the Muggle-repelling charms as well. At least they didn't have to go around the block to park the Anglia.

His good humour seemed to evaporate as they entered the pub, replaced by a sense of foreboding. It only increased as they all filed into a back room and sat down at a large table. The fragile peace ended the moment Tom the barman closed the door behind them.

"All right," Mr. Granger said in an angry voice, "we want some answers. What exactly is a Basilisk?"

Harry closed his eyes and rubbed at his forehead.

OoOoO

Harry admired Arthur Weasley's courage as he took it upon himself to answer the first barrage of questions. It didn't seem to help much, as Mr. Granger seemed to get more and more upset with every word.

"Are you people bloody insane?" he finally demanded. "Why the hell would you keep something like this in a school full of children?" His wife gave him a sharp look when he said "bloody", but didn't look much happier.

"Daddy, no one knew it was there!" Hermione finally said.

"How could they not know?" He asked, exasperated. "The letter we got said it was over fifty feet long!"

"It was in a hidden chamber, buried under the castle," Harry ventured, feeling like a bit of a coward for saying nothing so far. He changed his mind when Mr. Granger's glare focused on him. It didn't help that the man's anger was mostly justified.

“And what were a bunch of eleven- and twelve-year-old *children* doing down there?” Mr. Granger asked icily.

“It’s all my fault!” Ginny wailed. Mrs. Weasley tried to shush her, to no avail. “If you have to blame someone, blame me!”

Ginny’s distress seemed to remove most of Harry’s restraint. “It’s not her fault either,” he grated. “Someone tried to kill her and they almost succeeded. That’s what we were doing down there.” Respect his reasons or not, Harry wasn’t going to let him rail at Ginny for that mess with the diary. He folded his hands when he realized his fingernails were making indentions in the table top.

Mr. Granger opened his mouth, but his wife put a hand on his arm. “We don’t really understand any of this,” she said. “Hermione explained that there was some unpleasantness last year,” this was accompanied by a direct look that made Hermione bite her lower lip. “But she didn’t go into any details, so we thought it was fairly minor,” she explained. “Why would someone want to kill your daughter?”

“Do you remember when we discussed the, er, prejudices some people have against Muggles?” Arthur asked delicately.

Mr. Granger nodded slowly. “Yes, but your family is, how do you say it? Pure-blood, right?”

Arthur nodded. “Yes, but we still support equal rights for Muggle-born witches and wizards, as well as fair treatment of Muggles in general. I helped author a bill presented to the Wizengamot to make certain practices illegal and it... well, it made a lot of pure-bloods very upset.”

Mr. Granger frowned. “Let me get this straight. This was *politically* motivated? Someone tried to kill your daughter over this bill?” To Harry, he looked even more outraged.

“Partially,” Arthur agreed. “It doesn’t help that the person we think was behind this... Well, he’s been an enemy of mine for years, so this is indirectly my fault.”

“Stuff and nonsense,” Molly interjected. “That vile man is a public menace. While I don’t approve of public brawls, Arthur, it did my heart good to see you hit him.”

“Wait,” Mr. Granger said, “it was that guy at the bookstore? The one who called us –”

“The one dressed like a French pornographer?” Fred asked innocently. Harry was rather happy not to hear that word again, but several adults turned gimlet stares at the twins.

“Looks like Lee was right,” George observed. “He must, or they wouldn’t all be so mad at you for saying.”

“Ah, yes, it was him,” Arthur said quickly, trying to draw attention away from the furious whispers Molly was directing towards the twins.

“So if you know he did it, is he in jail?” Mr. Granger asked hopefully.

Arthur shook his head and sighed. “I’m afraid not. We don’t have enough evidence to press charges, much less guarantee a conviction.”

“And I imagine you’d need an airtight case against someone like that,” Mr. Granger added dryly.

“There was enough suspicion to get his son expelled from Hogwarts and to have him removed from the Board of Governors,” Arthur said.

Mr. Granger’s hands fisted at his sides. “Someone like *that* was on the committee in charge of *my* daughter’s education?” he asked in an outraged tone.

“Not anymore,” Arthur assured him.

“And how many others are there like him?” Mr. Granger asked in an icy tone.

Arthur frowned and started to say something, but stopped.

“Right,” Mr. Granger said, standing up. “That settles that. Hermione, say your goodbyes. We’re putting you in a proper school next term, away from all these nutters.”

“Daddy!” Hermione fairly shrieked.

“No arguments,” Mr. Granger commanded. “I can see why you’ve been covering up for so long.” He gave his daughter a sympathetic look. “I know how you love learning new things, but it simply isn’t safe. This is really our fault,” he added, “We should have asked better questions of that Professor McGonagall and sent her packing at the very start.”

Hermione’s mouth was opening and closing, but no words were coming out. Ron was frozen in place. His face had gone so pale that his freckles stood out like beacons. The adults all looked exceedingly uncomfortable, but none of them seemed inclined to interfere. Ginny looked perfectly miserable, and Harry had no doubt she’d blame herself for Hermione’s removal from Hogwarts as well. Neville was frowning, gripping the edge of the table, and Luna...

Luna was staring right at Harry, meeting his eyes for once. It was just a bit startling, but the imperative was unmistakable. *Do something!*

“If you do that, you’re placing her in even more danger,” a voice said, and it took a moment for Harry to realize that it was his own.

Mr. Granger rounded on Harry. “I’m not sure what you would know about it, but I suppose I should have guessed all that physical training had a purpose,” he said bitterly.

Harry shrugged. “I thought you knew. I imagine Hermione had good reasons for not telling you though, even if you don’t agree. She never does anything without a reason. Maybe she didn’t want you to think she was ashamed of you, because she was looked down upon because her parents weren’t magical.” All three Grangers stiffened. Harry was cheating just a bit, recalling an emotional conversation a future Hermione had with his analogue after her parents died.

“But that’s neither here nor there,” Harry continued. “Hermione Granger is one of the most intelligent witches to attend Hogwarts in

generations. Her very existence as a Muggle-born is an affront to the pure-bloods and their belief that their ancestry is more important than anything else. She regularly out-performs the scions of some very prestigious and bigoted noble houses. That already makes her a target. If you pull her out of Hogwarts and put her in a Muggle school, she'll never realize her magical potential, and as a half-trained witch, she'll be an easy target. They will come after her, and she won't be able to defend herself, even if the Ministry even lets her keep her wand, which I doubt. With no one to maintain them, the wards on your property will slowly fade over time. You'll have made it easy for them when they come for her."

"You make it sound like we're trapped," Mr. Granger accused in a sick and angry voice.

"I suppose you are," Harry said in a resigned tone, ignoring the imploring look Molly was giving him. All of the other people in the room were staring at him. Some knew the secret and therefore knew what his predictions were based on. For the others, they stared either because they didn't seem to understand why Harry was so sure, or why half the room was staring at The Boy Who Lived.

Harry sighed. "It's Hermione's nature to be brilliant, and it shows in everything she does. She's the proud nail that stands up and we all love her for it," he said with a sad smile, watching Hermione's face turn crimson. Then he looked at Mr. Granger and the smile disappeared. "But anyone wanting to play the hammer is going to have to get through me first," he added, his eyes boring into those of the older man.

"Me too!" Ron croaked, having finally found his voice. Neville, Ginny, and Luna said much the same thing half a beat later. To Harry's surprise, the twins and Percy added their agreement as well.

That seemed to take Mr. Granger back, and Mrs. Granger leaned over to put her arms around Hermione, who had burst into silent tears. After a moment, Hermione's father sat down, propped his elbows on the table, and massaged his temples. "All right," he said after a moment. "We won't make any rash decisions. I don't think Hogwarts is in any way an appropriate learning environment, but we may not

have any better options.” He looked up and glared at Harry. “You debate rather viciously for a thirteen-year-old.”

Harry looked down. He picked at the edge of the table. “I’m trying to protect my friend the best way I know how,” he said after a moment, then looked up.

Mr. Granger nodded slowly. “All right. So can anyone tell me what’s so valuable about a dead snake?”

OoOoO

After the initial drama, getting schedules worked out was rather simple. The day after Boxing Day, Harry and his friends would Floo over to Slughorn’s office, accompanied by Mr. Weasley. Professor Slughorn would oversee the actual quartering of the body and evaluating what materials would still be suitable for potion-making or other uses. As expected, the Head of Slytherin was fairly cautious in his estimates, but even the low-end figure for the individual shares had Mr. Granger raising his eyebrows.

“That’s more than enough to pay for university after Hermione finishes school,” Mrs. Granger noted.

Mr. Granger was still less than enthusiastic, but nodded. He mellowed a bit more when Molly invited all the Grangers over for dinner on Boxing Day. Harry thought it was a nice gesture after all the earlier tension. For his part, he couldn’t really blame anyone. It was an ugly situation the parents of every Muggle-born had to deal with. Maybe Hermione should have been more straightforward with her parents, but it couldn’t be easy telling them either.

After Tom the barman brought a light meal to the meeting room, and everyone had a sup and a bite, Arthur and Mr. Granger fell into a bit of good-natured wrangling over who was paying the tab. Mr. Weasley had just made the point that his brood represented a majority when Tom returned with the bill and was intercepted by Madam Longbottom.

Both men turned to stare at her as Tom left, realizing they'd been outmanoeuvred. Augusta Longbottom merely looked at them with an arched eyebrow. Neither of them said a word.

Harry glanced over at Neville, who was openly grinning.

It wasn't long after that before everyone went their separate ways. After Arthur helped him retrieve his trunk from the Anglia's boot, Neville and his Gran used Tom's Floo to get home. Hermione left with her parents while Molly offered Luna and her father a ride to Ottery St. Catchpole.

The long drive home passed more quickly than Harry expected. Mr. Lovegood and Mr. Weasley chatted all the way, Xenophilius asking Arthur about the Ministry, while Arthur in turn asked about the Lovegoods' Muggle neighbours. Harry was too entertained by the verbal fencing to get nervous about being closed in. While Mr. Lovegood would no doubt love to get material for his next *Quibbler* article, Mr. Weasley worked for a department that regulated interactions between Wizarding folk and Muggles – including rules regarding enchanted objects that Mr. Lovegood no doubt bent more than once. But the back and forth between them was entirely amicable, more like an old game between friends. Harry remembered that Ginny knew Luna from before Hogwarts, so there was little doubt the men were at least acquainted with each other.

Harry's thoughts strayed to the redheaded girl sitting quietly next to him. She hadn't said much since her outburst during the confrontation with Mr. Granger. Now her expression was composed, but pensive. Harry awkwardly patted her knee and she looked up and gave him a wan smile. He smiled back at her and shrugged. She sighed and leaned her head against his shoulder.

Harry closed his eyes, listening to the faint sounds of her breathing, feeling better than he had all day.

OoOoO

Harry was sitting next to the door; something he doubted was an accident, so he jumped out to help Luna with her trunk when they stopped at the Lovegood house. Mr. Weasley complimented



Xenophilius on how well his home blended into the neighbourhood and Luna's father responded that he was thinking about moving to a small tower just outside the village he'd heard might be up for sale soon.

Luna turned and stared at her father, who quickly reassured her it wasn't too far out of town, and it would give them a little more room. She was still frowning a little when she turned back to Harry.

"As long as you're on the Floo, you'll always be close enough," Harry murmured as they wrestled the trunk onto the front porch. He wondered if Luna had taken up rock collecting.

"That's not really it. My mother lived here," Luna said in a quiet voice.

"I see," Harry replied. He waited until they got the trunk into her room. Thinking about the troubles he had the first night at The Burrow, he lowered his voice to little more than a whisper when he spoke again. "Maybe that's why. Your father might want to live somewhere that doesn't always remind him."

Luna cocked her head and gave him one of those disturbingly direct looks again. "Is it hard for you?" she asked.

Harry shrugged, wondering how this had suddenly become a discussion of his mental state. "Sometimes," he admitted. "But I'm also building new memories, so I think..." he frowned. "I think those are helping dilute the effects of the bad ones. I hope so, anyway."

Luna nodded thoughtfully. "Maybe that will help my father," she mused. "If not, I can always find a Three-Tailed Mookabaru to cheer him up."

Harry smiled.

Author notes:

Time moves on, and while Harry is making plans and forming tentative alliances, he has no real idea of the forces moving to oppose him. cues sinister laughter

For some reason the argument between the adults was difficult to write. There were no right or wrong parties there, so it was important to keep it balanced, both in my head and on paper.

Thanks as always go out to Runsamok, Kokopelli, and Sherylyn for wonderful beta work. Going back and fixing minor errors, the majority of which were in the very early chapters, has only emphasized how much my betas have contributed to what could otherwise become a completely unwieldy task. I'll post the revised chapters when I'm fairly sure I've swatted all the bugs.

As always, there are news and progress updates available on the Viridian Dreams blog - the address is displayed in my profile, along with our new forums (there's already a discussion thread set up for this chapter). Runsamok and I were recently interviewed about this story on the PotterFicWeekly podcast, and I'll have a link to it posted on my blog when it goes live.

